02
JOE TAKEDUKI
ILLUST.
SHIRABII
The King's Return
FANTASY INBOUND
02
Asura-Type Exo-Frame MarkIII
"RUDRA"

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Gate Gate Paragate
Parasamgate
Bodhi Svaha...

"Well met, Vajra One, and welcome to my radiant abode. I am Scullchance of the Pride, the keeper and Dharva of this hold!"

All PRAJNA Running System
Now Booting,

Mantra Server Startup
Complete.

NAME

Scullchance

DATA

An archmage from the other side who is never apart from her lion. In battle, the two fuse together and she crushes her enemies with a great battle-axe.

Character bios

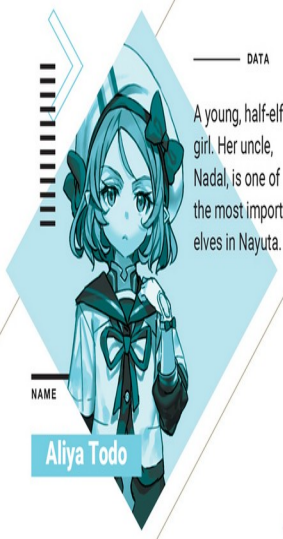
CHARACTERS

DATA

The successor to Devicer Three's Asura Frame, though his timid nature is at war with the duty his new title calls him to.

NAME

Yu Ichinose



DATA

A young, half-elf girl. Her uncle, Nadal, is one of the most important elves in Nayuta.

NAME

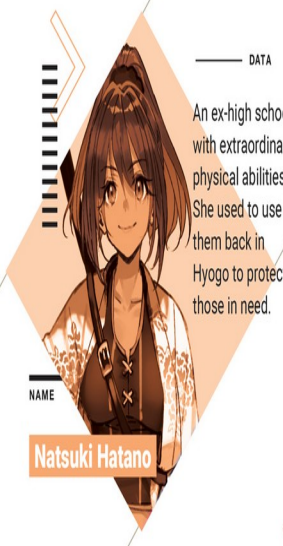
Aliya Todo

DATA

Part of the group that made the trek to Kansai and possessor of exceptional nano-fitness, like Yu.

NAME

Takamaru Ijuin



DATA

An ex-high schooler with extraordinary physical abilities. She used to use them back in Hyogo to protect those in need.

NAME

Natsuki Hatano

DATA

A Replicant girl who stands by Yu, the successor to the title of Three, no matter what.

NAME

Ein

TERMINOLOGY

— THE ASURA FRAME —

The more commonly known alias of the A-Type Exo-Frame, otherwise designated the Asura-Type. It is the ultimate weapon, a superpowered exoskeleton capable of neutralizing Anomalies upwards of threat level S+, and humanity's last hope. Only twelve exist in the world.

— DEVICER THREE —

The sole user of the Mark III Asura Frame. Unlike mass-produced Exo-Frames, only a chosen few can unleash the full power of the Asuras—a fact the inventors have impressed upon the world's governments thoroughly. Number Three was selected by Japan's Ministry of Defense and quickly became both a celebrity icon and a hero of the people.

— ANOMALIES AND PORTAL-KEEPS —

It's been many decades since the Earth became inexplicably linked to another world, bringing with it a slew of unknown creatures into our reality. The dangerous life-forms from the other side that now threaten humanity are known colloquially as Anomalies. In more recent years, enemy portal-keeps have begun to appear, entire fortresses that serve as portals which Anomaly forces use to attack en masse. Their armies are led by the keepers of these gates, the archmages.

— THE MIGRANT SAGES —

The original elves who escaped their world and found refuge on Earth. These migrants, with their characteristic pointed ears, imposing beauty, and—above all—unparalleled wisdom, are some of the brightest minds of their race and bear the title of "sage." In just a few short decades, they mastered the humans' sciences and brought about incredible innovations—including the twelve Asura Frames.

— THE ARCHMAGES —

Commanders of the enemy forces and keepers of the portals. They possess frightening magical powers, capable of controlling climate and inducing powerful earthquakes and floods. They also ally themselves with the fae. The elves refer to them as "the Chosen Dharva." It's said, however, that these mages appear more human than elvish.

Chapter 1: Prisoners of Castle Whirlwind

1

He called it a “citadel of cyclones.”

“I bid you welcome, warrior of black and gold!” The archmage Quldald spoke boisterously and in perfect Japanese. “And you as well, Your Grace. Forgive me, for I was not expecting a princess of the old blood, such as yourself.”

Humanity was well aware of the enemy’s ethereal castles, a scourge that could cross realities and invade the Earth from the other side. But Yu Ichinose had experienced more of these portal-keeps than most. He blinked the sleep from his eyes and cleared the fog from his mind enough to be able to take in his surroundings. For a so-called “warrior,” he felt awfully vulnerable without his armor.

He was in a courtyard, presumably within the keep itself, and at his side was Ein, the Replicant elf girl.

“It looks just like the last one,” Yu whispered to her. “Are all portals like this?”

“They share the same purpose,” Ein answered. “A castle must accommodate its levies.”

The courtyard beneath Yu and the warrior queen’s clone was barren. The ground was hard, packed tight by the boots of the countless soldiers and monsters who had marched through it. Castle walls cast shadows over the dreary earth, like the fake ramparts of a dreamy palace above a theme park, only real. The imposing presence and quaint, senescent energy of a fortress that had seen generations of war was irreplicable.

One hour prior, Yu and Ein had been locked in combat against the archmage of the Great Kansai Bay, Scullchance of the Pride. After a near escape, they had made for Nayuta, a floating settlement in the waters of Wakayama Bay, with the help of the Mark III Asura Frame—a practically all-powerful Exo-Frame created with the collective wisdom of human- and elfkind for the sole purpose of combating the otherworldly forces. An artificial mad god of destruction.

But the Frame had suddenly malfunctioned, and its wearer had lost consciousness. The last thing Yu remembered before waking up was falling headfirst into the ocean. When he awoke, a handsome man in a blue robe had been waiting on them.

“How pleased I am to finally make your acquaintance. I am Quldald, Keeper of the Whirlwind and Chosen Dharva, at your service,” the archmage greeted sonorously. “Oh, but how rude of me. Your people refer to us as ‘archmages,’ don’t they?”

Quldald carried himself with inviting and friendly grace. He was brimming with charm and flashed a suitably fetching grin. “Be proud, warrior,” he said. “You very well may be the first human to have ever set foot in our domain. Twice, in fact! Unbelievable. Simply heroic!”

Yu blanched at the archmage’s demeanor. “I... What?” he stammered. “You’re the one who brought us here.”

The young man was indeed a decently pleasant individual, but he was also an enemy commander. An invader from the other side. Yu struggled to decide how much courtesy to afford such a person.

“He’s right,” said Ein, drawing close to Yu. “We did not willingly ‘set foot’ anywhere, Dharva.”

If the mage was to be believed, he had plucked them from the ocean with his magic, making Yu and Ein his prisoners. They were captives of his skyborne palace.

And yet, Quldald was treating them as honored guests.

“Nonsense!” he refuted with genuine amity. “It was your beauty that compelled my hand to act, stygian warrior! Rarely do I ever witness such definitive makings of a hero. You simply must grace me with the opportunity again. I *must* see that beauteous armor once more.”

“The...armor,” Yu repeated to himself.

Moments before everything went dark, as he sank into the ocean, Yu remembered the Mark III de-armorizing, disassembling itself into adaptive nanofactors and returning to his body. Recalling the sudden, intense vertigo he had felt at the time almost made his head spin all over again, although he actually felt perfectly fine now. Come to think of it, he should have been dripping wet.

“Ah,” said Quldald, noticing Yu examining his own body with confusion, “consider it a token of goodwill.” One side of his relaxed smile lifted into a smirk. “No guests of mine will be made to enjoy their stay with drenched clothing. Absolutely not. I also took it upon myself to relieve what ailed you, warrior. Now, your room ought to be made by now, I should think. I beg of you, rest your weary bodies for a spell.”

The archmage had not only gone out of his way to presumably use magic to dry their clothes, but also to heal Yu. Already he had displayed more respect and kindness than the whole of Maizuru’s military ever had.

This is our enemy? Yu thought. These are the people who destroyed Japan? The entire world?

Yu and Ein’s captor was not the evil monster that Yu had been imagining. And he had no idea how to reconcile that dissonance.

The room was very comfortable. Spacious, and the rug was pleasant to the touch. There were no tables or chairs, but the myriad of geometric patterns embroidered into the rug and the rainbow of colorful tapestries on the walls made it feel less empty. It was awfully tasteful for a prison.

Yu sat on his knees, stiff as a board, with the plush carpet against the top of his feet. Ein was sitting next to him with her legs comfortably yet elegantly off to the side. Her sharp and alert eyes betrayed her relaxed posture as they examined the room.

"Yu. Look." She pointed out the window. "The Void."

"The what?" Yu followed her finger. "What—What *is* this place?!"

A balcony extending from the room offered a generous view of the castle, and at a glance it seemed that the other side's architectural styles were not so different from Earth's. But more striking than that was the sky, or more specifically, what was drifting through the dull, gray expanse. Spirals. Long, narrow spirals. Circular spirals. Billowing spirals. So many spirals, drifting through the air like clouds. Yu felt dizzy just looking at them.

"It was a plain blue sky just a while ago, wasn't it?" Yu asked.

"Because we were still in your home," Ein answered. "Your world. The castle has dematerialized and now occupies the Void. Beyond the akasha lies *our* world. Param."

Most simply called it "the other side," or "the other world." But it did in fact have a name.

Param. The migrant elves' home. The Anomalies' home. The Chosen Dharva's home.

"So this…grayness is the border between my world and yours," Yu deduced. "This is where the portal-keeps go when they turn aerial."

Ein nodded proudly. "Well put," she said. "Earth drains us of our magic. They have to return here as a precautionary measure."

"Meaning," said Yu, "we're not even on the right planet." His shoulders sagged. "That makes escaping a little difficult. We'll have to wait for it to reappear back on—Ein, why are you grinning at me?"

"Simply basking in your nerve," she replied. Her grin tinted her voice with a bright lilt. "We're in an entirely alien situation, yet you're already calculating our escape."

"I mean, I'm not exactly planning on getting comfortable."

"What a coincidence! We share a mind." Ein took Yu's hand and squeezed it. "I was just about to suggest absconding myself. You and I. Together." Yu's heart skipped a beat, a reaction he considered very natural for a fourteen-year-old boy in a situation like this. The Replicant girl's powerful eyes stared deep into Yu's, and she lowered her voice to a murmur. "You always do what's right, when it's right. And that makes you strong. Yu Ichinose, I can think of no better man to stand alongside the queen of the gales. In sickness and in health, I would be with you. Forevermore."

"*Phrasing*! Please!" Yu hissed. His face burned. She was only a few steps away from proposing outright marriage. "Why do you have to be so suggestive?!"

"Suggestive of what?" Ein asked. "I was simply stating my desire for our continued partnership because I enjoy your company. Well, now you've

gone and got me curious. Tell me, what else could I have possibly been suggesting?"

"Not important!"

Yu separated himself from her, ending the discussion before Ein could have the satisfaction of teasing him any further. Although, she *was* terribly charming in her advances. Maybe giving in to them wouldn't be such a bad idea...

Yu firmly refocused himself. "We're supposed to be prisoners, so why isn't there more security?" he wondered. "No one locked the door, and the window doesn't even have glass in it. I was expecting a few iron bars or something at least."

"What if," Ein said, "the bars would be redundant?"

Ein stood and paced over to the balcony. Yu jumped up and scurried behind her.

Their chamber was situated at the very top of a six-story-tall tower, providing a more than expansive panorama of the area. Races of all manner of color, stature, and anatomy wandered the enclosed grounds. Trolls, goblins and other gremliny imps, cow-headed minotaurs, and giant, blue-skinned cyclopes.

But one stood out. One particularly eye-catching creature, floating in the air.

It was an eyeball. Enormous. Easily at least ten meters across. And it hovered right in front of their room. Its pupil twitched and fixed itself directly on them.

"Warrior!" Quldald called, floating next to the monster. "And Your Grace, hello! You have impeccable timing!"

The archmage stood in the air as naturally as if it were solid ground. He was pointing his staff at the Anomaly with a smile bright as day.

A pale green light rippled from the tip of the staff, which the eye absorbed, narrowing its pupil in ecstasy. Gradually, flesh began to grow around it, enveloping the eyeball in a sphere of green scales, until the monstrous orb was complete with a protective layer. The creature's gaze, an ocular nightmare, pierced with all the intensity as before its transformation, and more.

"I was just outfitting one of my kin, you see," said Quldald jovially. "It is my hope that this will be a sufficient match for your armor, dear warrior." The man's smile never faltered. "I take it there will be no complaints. Now that you're rested, you surely want to be on your way home as soon as possible. However, I must beseech you to indulge me. Armored one, let us see which is the better: you, or my lovely familiar!"

"Yu, he never intended to imprison us from the start," Ein surmised. She shrugged a shoulder. "A cell could never contain the Asura, and he knows it. He means to keep you here by overpowering you."

"In other words," Yu said, "we beat that thing or we're not getting back to Earth."

Yu broke out of his frightened stupor and looked hard at the palm of his right hand. The ring of light, the mark of the nano-augmented, glowed as his nanomachines began to react. He sighed.

The Mark III Asura Frame—Rudra—was more than likely humanity's last hope. And it was currently on the fritz. Left with little choice, though, Yu had to take his chances.

2

The settlement of Nayuta could be found floating in Wakayama Bay somewhere around 34°N, 134.5°E. The central block that formed the beating heart of the city was ten kilometers across by itself. There, water was recycled, green energy was generated via a large-scale Prayer Wheel, and food was farmed in sprawling fields. Very much like a heart, it was essential for survival.

Overlooking it all at over three hundred meters tall was a tower right in the very middle of the settlement. Among its various other functions, the sleek and modern obelisk served as a landmark for approaching ships. But its true scale could only be appreciated when viewed from the bustling docks.

Takamaru Ijuin's hype exceeded his self-control parameters.

"Buildings!" he shouted. "And they're not even falling apart!"

Ijuin was as big as he was proud to call himself the second Devicer Three's best friend.

The half-elf girl with him shared his excitement. "They've got running water and electricity. We've found society again, Ijuin!"

Aliya Todo was thirteen, and if the gentle, yet strikingly beautiful, features beneath her chestnut hair weren't evidence enough, her pointed ears made her elvish heritage plainly obvious—though her father had been Japanese.

They had crossed the Great Kansai Bay aboard a rusted old cargo ship with a large group of refugees, and at last, they had disembarked at their destination. About ten days and a journey from the Sea of Japan to the Pacific later, they had arrived at Nayuta. But the trip to the tower in the central block wasn't exactly an easy hike.

The docks were located in Nayuta's exterior ring, the outer block. Together with the central block, they made the circular city, in total, twenty-five kilometers in diameter.

Whereas the central block provided the infrastructure and support for everyday life, the outer block was where the everyday life actually happened. Residential housing, harbors, and all sorts of civilian buildings made up the rim of the city.

"This is probably where the refugees will hole up," said Jurota Shiba. He was a painfully average man in his thirties and all too easy to lose in a crowd. Aliya's uncle, Nadal—an elf of notable influence within the

settlement—had entrusted him with the vitally important mission of recovering the Mark III Asura Frame, its Devicer, and his companions.

"No one allowed to live in the central area or something?" Natsuki Hatano asked the bland, bespectacled envoy.

"It's not really that," Shiba replied, "so much as it is that the tower's the only real habitable structure there. It's where the elves live, and, well." Shiba chose his next words carefully. "Let's just say that their lifestyle is a little...uncomfortable for the average person."

"Hey now, Sheebs, 'different' doesn't mean they don't know how to party!"

The seventeen-year-old wasn't one to let a silly little thing like seniority stop her from being rather—some might say *overly*—friendly and relaxed. She had the appearance to match her personality, with her dyed red hair, short tank top, and denim shorts. A white, peony-patterned furisode fluttered around her like a long coat. On her back was sheathed a military-made monomolecular blade, forged into the shape of a katana. In a word, "flashy" was her aesthetic.

"So that tower or whatever," she said. "You gonna take us there? That's where we can find out where Yu and Ein are, yeah?"

"Yeah!" Aliya interjected. "It's been over an hour and they're still missing!"

The excitement of finally reaching their goal was short-lived, and soon, anxiety had fallen back over the half-elf. Aliya hadn't been able to keep her eyes off the horizon throughout the whole voyage, watching for any sign of Yu or Ein. It was only thanks to those two holding the Anomalies off that the rest of them had made it.

"There's that military satellite you mentioned, right?!" Ijuin pressed. His voice was frantic. "If it's supposed to be the Asura Frame's support network, then you can use it to find Ichinose's location!"

"Y-Yes, of course," Shiba said. "Volonov?"

"Take it," the large Russian man in camo pants rumbled. He held out a car key, his dour expression unchanging.

The vehicle was electric. No gasoline needed.

Shiba sat at the wheel. "Most of the cars here are of a similar make. International trade's not much of a thing these days, and no petroleum means no gas or diesel." The man shrugged, a pitiful gesture that suited him well. "Works pretty well, given the times."

Natsuki was seated next to him in the passenger seat, while the two middle schoolers took the back. It wasn't long before they came out on a relatively wide avenue. Ijuin's eyes sparkled with glee.

"It's an actual town!" he cried.

Shabby buildings lined the road, painting a picture evocative of garrison towns after a long war. Simple structures pieced together with corrugated iron and wood. Shops and vendors peddling wares on the side of the street

punctuated the scenery. People could be seen in every direction, all walking somewhere with purpose.

Once they were through the shanty town, Natsuki noted the new surroundings and muttered, “Bunch o’ storage sheds now.”

“Prefabs,” Aliya clarified. “Modular houses you see in disaster areas sometimes.”

Further along, the buildings coalesced into what appeared to be a residential district of some kind, packed with seemingly hundreds of one-story accommodations.

“This was originally the only place for humans to stay in all of Nayuta,” Shiba explained, assuming the role of tour guide. “Anyone who wasn’t an elf could live here for as long or as short as they liked, but the more refugees we got, the more shelters we needed for them. Eventually, they grew into the areas we just passed through.”

“I thought I saw some people living on their boats at the docks,” Ijuin remarked.

“There’s not enough to go around, is there?” Aliya noted.

“Naw,” refuted Natsuki. “They’ve got all those smarty-pants elves here to look after them. Free healthcare sounds like a good deal to me!” The younger two’s gloomy expressions paled in the face of Natsuki’s vivacious grin. “Hey, Sheebs, what’s that about?”

Shiba saw where she was pointing and gave a nervous laugh. “So you noticed, huh? Let’s save that conversation for later.”

Great big signs and banners hung off of a warehouse. They read many things in plain, easily legible letters.

The elves live like kings! Let humans into the central block!

Brothers and sisters, bring glory back to the great nation of Japan!

The car hummed over a four-lane bridge. Beneath was a vast, endless chasm that seemed to extend forever.

“This bridge connects the outer and inner blocks,” Shiba said. “There’s a few of them all around the perimeter. Just try not to fall, because if you do, no one’s coming to rescue you.”

An instant later, and the world changed. Where once there were makeshift houses, vendors, stores, warehouses, and small workshops, broken only by the occasional tree or park, the inner block was a blanket of green.

Aliya breathed in wonder. “They really went out of their way to make sure the road cut right between the trees,” she said. “Classy. The elves love their nature—and I’m half, so I’m allowed to say that.”

The sun hanging over Wakayama Bay poured its rays through the mosaic of leaves, illuminating the road with verdant light. Through the wooded area, the trees gave way to views of expansive farmland. It was early April, spring was right around the corner, and the fields would soon be brimming with rice and grain.

Ijuin and his ever-insatiable appetite murmured, “Man, am I glad to see those. Maybe we can get some fresh rice when fall hits.” Then he blinked in surprise. “Hey, what’s the military doing out here?”

Five men uniformed in blue camouflage fatigues and matching caps—the Naval Defense’s dress code for onshore servicemen—stood in one of the narrow paths between the paddies. One of them was pointing to the sky, at an airborne drone. Four propellers carried a cross-shaped frame slowly along a predetermined path over the fields.

“Almost looks like one of those mech things Yu uses,” Natsuki commented. “Actually, there’s lots of them. Extra security?”

The master swordswoman, perceptive as ever, pointed to even more drones drifting across the sky. Machines that looked more humanoid stood around like metal scarecrows, occasionally walking to new positions with uncannily smooth movements. Four-legged robots resembling dogs bounded through the footpaths.

“That’s right,” Shiba said. “They’re the central block’s security droids, the latest in drone technology. We use them for farm work sometimes too. In fact, the Mark III’s droids are the same model, only more advanced, so that’s where the resemblance comes from.”

“But who were those men?” asked Aliya. “It looked like they were studying their routes. Why?”

“Oh, well, you know.” Shiba tried to change the subject with a nervous chuckle, then sighed. “I think you’ll understand soon enough. We’ll be at Central Tower soon. When we get there, we can meet with Speaker Nadal and find out more about your missing friends. Assuming he doesn’t fire me for screwing up.” An odd twinge of hope colored his voice. “One can dream.”

The road stretched on, until at last, the skyscraping tower was within reach. Inside awaited Nadal Rafthul, Aliya’s uncle and one of the seats on Nayuta’s governing council.

3

The interior of Central Tower was pleasantly familiar. The ground floor was sanitary yet tasteful, welcoming even, and a number of people paced across the room, entering and exiting the various elevators that, much to the surprise of the new visitors, were all fully functional. Lights—genuine, electric-powered lights—lit up anywhere the afternoon sun didn’t. Cool air flowed from the air conditioning.

Everything the Kanto and Kansai regions were supposed to be was right here. Modern society.

Virtually every passerby was a migrant elf. It was impossible not to notice, what with their long and pointed ears, remarkable beauty, and the grace they tended to carry themselves with. It was difficult to reliably distinguish the ages of the otherworldly people, and even the oldest of them

looked not a year past thirty. But what they *could* be distinguished by was their clothing.

Some elves wore suits and ties, others kept to street clothes, and still others veiled their bodies beneath Islamic burqas. Saris, ao dais, and even Roman togas adorned the elvish people.

“Whoa!” Natsuki could hardly keep her eyes to herself. “Look at all the elves!”

“They’re not so hard to find if you know where to look,” said Aliya. “But for the record, I’m not very fond of anywhere the sages like to gather.” The half-elf spoke with a conviction grounded in experience. “The elves are so diverse—there are warriors, farmers—but just about the only ones who came to Earth were scholars and mages who held the rank of sage. And I couldn’t think of a more stuffy and uptight group of geniuses to cram into one place.”

“Oh yeah, they’re geniuses, all right,” Ijuin said, only half-absorbing what he had just been told. Unlike Aliya’s elvish upbringing, Ijuin had enjoyed a rather affluent childhood in Yokohama. “It’s hard to think about how far behind science’d be without them. Seriously, with all those Einsteins walking around, it’s like they’re *born* with brains!”

Aliya sighed. “They are generally smart, but there’s more to it than that,” she said. “There are many secret techniques used to hone the mind and soul, and only through those can someone be deemed a sage. I learned a little myself, but my point is that in their culture, being a ‘genius’ is not an inherent quality. It’s something attained through effort.”

“Yeah, you did always score highest on benchmark exams,” Ijuin said, nodding.

Shiba nodded with him. “Some of them have really astonishing abilities, like photographic memory. Speaker Nadal included.” A grimace of uncertainty twisted his face. “It’s just hard to tell with him sometimes, beneath all the…well, everything.”

The man did little to hide his misgivings about his superior as they loaded onto an elevator.

“A thousand welcomes, friends. And to you, Aliya, daughter of my beloved sister. How fortunate it is that your long journey saw you here safely.”

“Uh, thanks.” Ijuin was left bewildered by the sage.

They had found Nadal Rafthul T’ashsakharington in his office, on the fifty-seventh floor of Central Tower. His golden hair was buzzed short, and a monkish air of wisdom comprised his austere expression. He swept his all-seeing eyes over his niece and her friends.

“What’s, uh… What’s with the cosplay?” Ijuin asked. “That glowing sword you’re swinging around looks like one of the expensive models. Does it come with the Force?”

“Silence, human boy!” Nadal hissed. “If you cannot see that I simply bear a passion for the Jedi Knights and their sabers, then you are blind to the truth!”

“Okay.”

“You see, I was meditating on our settlement’s future, drawing inspiration from the Galactic Federation’s great struggle against the Sith. Therefore, these goods are a highly necessary work expense. All 26,800 yen of it. Understand?”

“Oh. Sorry. I thought you were just screwin’ around.”

“Very good,” the speaker said, eyeing the boy up and down. “It’s admirable of you to admit your faults.”

Nadal was wearing a hooded robe over an ascetic tunic that nearly every human on the planet would have recognized as belonging to a certain famous, nine-part science fiction franchise. They had entered his office to find him locked in deadly combat against an unseen opponent, complete with sound effects. The performance had left much to be desired.

“Uncle,” Aliya said with a sigh. “If you’re going to swing that thing around like a child, then at least demonstrate some knowledge of your home’s swordsmanship. Something graceful, like Lord of the Rings.”

“Foolish girl,” Nadal rebuked. “T’would be to blaspheme against the scholarly arts to pick up a sword before a pen.”

“It’s entirely possible to do both,” his niece argued. “You should do yourself a favor and just admit that you couldn’t so much as kick a ball to save your life.”

Aliya’s advice went unheeded as her uncle ignored her, shifting the discussion away from himself. “It’s truly a tragedy what happened to your mother. To my own blood,” he said. “But let’s focus on the living for now. I hear the new Devicer and the princess are missing?”

“Yes,” Shiba said at once. “The responsibility is all mine. I’d be more than willing to accept the consequences.”

“Great,” said Nadal. “I’m holding a screening of all six feature films from *Star Trek: The Original Series*, but absolutely no one has expressed any initiative in studying Earth’s cultural works with me. I will see you there.”

“Can’t you just fire me like a normal person?!” Shiba pleaded. “At least demote me from captain if you won’t take me off the militia!”

“And why would I divest myself of a perfectly capable subordinate when we’re already understaffed?” The sage gave Shiba a judging look. “You’re a little slow in the head, aren’t you?”

Natsuki regarded the unapologetically insolent man with a curious grin. “Ein said this guy was some kinda sneaky tactician, yeah?” she said. “I’m not seeing a lot of tact here. Just a whole lotta weirdo.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” said Aliya. “But it is true that he’s a master in the art of being a snake.”

“Uh, no? It’s called retrospective foresight, and we elves have practiced it for generations,” Nadal claimed, inserting himself into the conversation.

“We study history; observe the ways society shaped around the conditions of the time; analyze the sociological, circumstantial, and natural course of events therewithin; and superimpose those trends to the present day to solve modern problems.”

The speaker took a pause. “If we lose both the Mark III and our princess of the wind,” he continued, “there’s an eight-seven percent chance that civilization on Earth will regress more than one thousand years. So this search and rescue *must* succeed. No matter what.”

Speaker Nadal guided Devicer Three’s friends to a special room. The very top of Central Tower, where all information regarding the outside world was gathered.

The sixtieth floor of the tower was more a lounge than a data center, and the uninterrupted glass lining the circumference of the entire room afforded a complete view of the radial settlement, as well as of the ocean beyond. The central block was dotted with forests and ponds between stretches of farmland, blue and green being the most immediately prominent hues. In contrast, much of the surrounding outer block was barren and vacant, but sprinklings of simple, concentrated residences marked the beginnings of new communities.

To the west of it all, across Wakayama Bay, the shores of Shikoku could just barely be made out.

Natsuki squinted through her nano-augmented eyes. “I can see Tokushima from here.”

Nanomachine augmentations manifested in their recipients in a variety of ways, and in the samurai girl’s case, they had bestowed her with superhuman abilities. Enhanced eyesight was just one of the many benefits. Her vision was so keen that she could even make out the twinkle of the stars in the middle of the day.

Aliya nodded. “There’s Awaji Island to the north, and you might be able to see the Kii Peninsula to the east.”

“I’d love to go take a look, but I dunno how to even get the heck across this room.” Ijuin’s volume was only a whisper, which was really quite the feat for him. “It’s so pretty and quiet and…awkward. I feel like a fish outta water over here.”

A reverent and calm quiet commanded the entire floor, and combined with the many plants decorating the room, it gave the place the air of a serene hanging garden.

Elvish sages populated the room, murmuring in polite, hushed tones, maintaining a level and constant hum of conversation that never disturbed the peace. Most of what they spoke about was confusing and technical.

“Thirty minutes since the Avalo satellite transmitted the callback signal,” one said. “Results?”

“No response,” said another. “Our prodigal son has been very taciturn since his awakening. Nothing from the locator signal in case of de-armorization either.”

“We must consider the possibility that he’s sustained large amounts of damage.”

“As well as the probability that he is outside of signal range. In which case, we ought to consider that he may be within the company of a portal.”

“Communications could be magically jammed.”

At first glance, it almost looked like a gathering of celebrities lounging around, sharing classy gossip. The sages were certainly youthful, beautiful, and cultured enough to fit the role.

But they were scientists, through and through. Contributors to the development of the Asura Frame. And they referred to the Mark III, Rudra, with appropriate deference, as if it were a living, breathing human.

They referred to it as a “he.”

As the sages discussed strategies, countermeasures, and hypotheses, they would frequently make hand gestures through the air, manipulating 2D images and 3D holograms. A motion-controlled computer turned the very air into an interface. Yet another of the elves’ many scientific innovations.

“I never really thought about it before, but I guess a floating colony would be gadget city, huh?” Ijuin said. “They’re using those things like it’s just second nature to ’em. None of the labs at Maizuru had anything that advanced.”

Ijuin eyed the watches wrapped around the sages’ wrists with the gaze of an intrigued techie. Not only were the miniature computers lightweight and portable, but they were pretty dang stylish too.

The vast majority of elves in the room were swiping and staring at the data displayed on their next-gen devices.

“Oh, yay for technology,” Aliya moaned sarcastically. “Why enjoy the sights when you can take your work wherever you go?”

“Yeah, I’m getting hungry, and these guys are making it real awkward to just start snacking,” Natsuki murmured. There was genuine distress in her tone.

Ijuin nodded at her. “You and me? We’re on the same page.”

“Yeah, you get me,” Natsuki said. “Hear that, Sheebs? The cafeteria’s calling our name. Lead the way.”

“Sure, but there’s something you should know first.” Shiba paused. “There’s no meat.”

Ijuin and Natsuki’s jaws dropped as an incredulous, deafening silence came crashing down.

“The sages have to follow certain precepts.” Aliya took a bite of her skewered fish. Every fisherman with pride in his craft knew how to fillet a chicken grunt and roast it up like—well, like an actual chicken. Add a little salt and the tiny fish was pretty appetizing, bones and all. It might have

been a tad out of season, but this particular fellow had eaten well, and the fat was delicious. “No alcohol. No meat. No raising your voice. And I guess they extended those rules to anyone who visits or works at the tower.”

They had returned to the more urban outer block and were near the harbor. The four of them had purchased chicken grunt skewers from a human vendor, courtesy of Shiba, and they stared out at the bay as they ate.

Ijuin had just finished his fifth when he shouted, “For real?! No fried chicken?! No *ham sandwiches*?!”

The boy started inhaling a sixth as Shiba nibbled slowly on his own. “No fish either,” he said. He grimaced. “I’m not much of a meat eater, personally, but even I get sick of the tofu and vegetables sometimes. I take trips out here pretty often.”

“They definitely got fish to spare,” said Natsuki, tracing the waves with her eyes. “We never could get much back at my place. Didn’t have the gas to send boats out. Just had to hope stuff’d get caught in our nets.” She snapped her fingers. “That reminds me. There was this one time when these guys were trying to sell rat and frog meat off as chicken. Honestly? The frog wasn’t half bad.”

“Isn’t there a fishery here?” Aliya asked.

Shiba’s glasses glinted as he nodded. “Yup. And we have plenty of electric-powered boats to go fishing. The real issue is red meat. Central Tower has a plant where they lab grow the stuff, but to be frank, it’s not great.”

“You mean there’s no meat *anywhere*?!” Ijuin shouted.

“Not necessarily,” Shiba replied. “The outer block has places where they raise broilers. Supply just doesn’t exactly meet demand, so it can be hard to find.”

Ijuin exhaled in overdramatic despondence. “Remember those pheasants Lady Ein got for us? They were so good.” The Replicant girl was a master markswoman, and she knew how to provide in the wild. She had hunted and butchered no less than two green pheasants on their journey to Osaka, the memory of which made Ijuin’s mouth water. “I wish she and Ichinose were here.”

“I do too,” Aliya agreed. “It doesn’t feel like we’ve made it without them.”

It wasn’t easy to face a war, let alone the destruction of your homeland, but it was a little easier with someone else by your side. Ijuin and Aliya missed their comrades, the ones they had weathered the storm with.

Natsuki pointed towards something. “More of the same, looks like.”

Warehouses on the coast were a common enough sight for a harbor, and these would have been no exception, if it weren’t for the wooden signs hanging from many of them. The words painted on them were nearly illegible, but the emotions behind the violent strokes were evident.

No more power curfews!

Close the city! No more refugees!

Aliya cocked her head. “I thought my uncle was going to be up all night watching those nerdy movies.”

“That’s, well…” Shiba fidgeted nervously. “That’s a privilege of Central Tower. That is, the elves. As advanced as this city is, we don’t have infinite energy, so power to the outer block stops every night at nine. But everything runs off of the central block, meaning we can’t just cut electricity there.” He glanced at the signs. “This wasn’t a problem at first. But a few rowdy individuals is all you really need to kick up trouble.”

“Trouble,” Natsuki said. “Hmm, lemme guess.” The samurai girl gave her trademark devil-may-care grin. “You’ve got a buncha refugees, they start thinking the elves are sitting pretty up in their tower, and now you’ve got problems.”

“I-It’s not everyone, really,” Shiba insisted.

But he never denied it.

4

The gargantuan, fleshy eyeball creature floated in midair, emanating malevolence. Yu stared out at the Anomaly’s green, newly grown scales from the balcony of their cell, if it could be called that.

“Rakshasa,” Ein growled. “You’ve great power at your beck and call, I see!”

“What kind of Anomaly is that?!” Yu asked.

“In more common tongues, rakshasa means demon,” she clarified. “They sometimes take the shape of people, but it isn’t unheard of for them to manifest more grotesquely, like what you see here. Make no mistake, they wield powerful magical arts and abilities. They are second in ferocity only to the Chosen Dharva themselves!”

“Warrior!” Quldald bellowed. “Don your armor. It is not my wish to see you or Her Grace meet untimely ends.”

“Then put that pet of yours on a leash!” Yu shouted back.

The eye demon gyrated, its single pupil darting down to the balcony, and a violet wave of light gleamed horribly from it, right down to Yu and Ein.

“Mark III!” Yu shouted. “Shroud!”

The nanofactors spilled out, coating his slender body in a suit of nano-armor, everywhere except for the arms he had lost in the previous battle. The Holy Shroud snaked down from Yu’s neck and wrapped around his exposed limbs.

The Asura Frame finished armorizing right as the wave of violet was upon him, but Ein was left unprotected. Rudra’s anti-magic shell didn’t extend to her.

That singular thought crossed Yu’s mind, and the Shroud shimmered, a golden light that grew brighter, bigger, quickly swelling beyond the cloth itself until a barrier enclosed both Devicer Three and the Replicant.

“You extended the shell’s power to create a protective field!” Ein breathed. “Still discovering more of the Holy Shroud’s tricks, are you?”

“I had a lot of help.”

It was a strange feeling. Yu sensed something from the Frame and the Holy Shroud. Something alive. They weren't tools. There was life—a conscious will—within them.

"Yes!" Quldald roared in delight. "There is our hero! Oh, how I would love to rip those plates from you and have that armor for myself. And you yourself, young warrior, would make a fine trophy as well!" The archmage waved his staff. "Now kneel!"

The demon charged down towards the balcony, spitting in gravity's face much like the Mark III could. A sharp, ear-splitting screech whined from the monstrous eye as it descended.

"My ears!" Yu groaned. "Ein, are you okay?"

"Thanks to your shield, it seems!" she replied.

Doubtless the Anomaly was aiming to kill, and the sound wave it had emitted would have surely lethally maimed them if the anti-magic shell's barrier hadn't dampened its intensity.

"Yes, very good," Quldald said, satisfaction dripping from his smile. "Very good! Let the match begin! I simply love a good gladiatorial bout. It's all I can do to keep from plucking every fine swordsman for myself, truth be told, but you! Ah, you I could not keep away from! What fortune!"

A single gust of wind blew, and the next instant he was gone. Yu and Ein were left alone with the creature, apparently toys for the archmage's amusement.

"Gladiators? He wants to enslave us?" Yu said. "I don't get it! He's a decent guy one minute and now he wants us to fight to the death!"

"Yu, you come from different worlds," Ein reasoned. "The archmage may seem amiable, and I'm almost certain he genuinely is, but I'm just as certain that he would slaughter entire nations without the slightest hint of hesitation and force slaves to cut each other's throats for the sport of it. He would be in good company in our world. Param's heroes are often men like him."

"Different worlds," Yu muttered. He took a deep breath. "I guess you're right."

Yu finally felt like he understood. To an extent, anyway. The enemies they fought came from a world of swords and sorcery, and they were the greats. Powerful mages who took countless lives because there was victory, conquest, in it. They were heroes who had likely committed acts of ruthless calculation that surpassed Yu's wildest imaginings. Indeed, they were great. Depending on which side of the blade you were on.

All it really came down to was familiarity. We saw more of ourselves in a group of refugee scientists than the archmages. A Japanese middle schooler saw more of himself in the clone of an elvish queen than the heroes of another world.

They were larger than life, in both ability and character. They were alien.

“The enemy forces are probably filled with men like him,” Yu murmured.

The demonic eye continued to loose spells with its magical sight. A glance was all it needed to hex its victims, and the Mark III’s sensors identified them as they came. Gaze of Death. Gaze of the Gorgon. Gaze of Bursting. The anti-magic shell didn’t let a single curse through, but Yu still felt years of his life shed away with every new alert.

“We should test if the creature has any non-magical capabilities,” Ein suggested. “Close in for the attack, Yu!”

“Right! Come on, Mark III!” Yu kicked off the ground. But instead of lifting off, he looked down in confusion to find his feet still firmly planted. “What? This...isn’t right!” he groaned. “My body feels so heavy!”

It was as if multiple balls and chains were weighing him down. Yu heaved himself still forward, one strenuous foot at a time, his joints creaking with each tiny movement.

The demon loomed less than a dozen meters away. To the Mark III, it was a negligible distance. Yu could clear it in a fraction of a second and throw out a punch or kick just as quickly. But the Frame wasn’t right.

“It’s the same as earlier today!” Yu hissed through gritted teeth.

“Watch out!” Ein called. “It looks like it wants a brawl as well!”

Suddenly, a different sort of magic permeated the demon, and burly, humanlike arms burst forth from each side of the eyeball. They were proportioned accordingly, as giant as the titanic eye itself. A swift right hook slammed into the Mark III.

Yu wailed as he and the black-and-gold nano-armor sailed through the air, away from the balcony. For all his instincts, and for all the sensors’ warnings, the Frame simply had not moved—*could not* move—no matter how hard Yu tried, and continued to try, as he entered a free fall. The anti-gravity lifters refused to respond. He started to panic.

And then, he heard a voice.

“Fly, my healing prayer! By the Enlightened One’s merciful touch, by the life so safeguarded, reach out with a thousand hands! Fly to my ally’s aid!”

The voice was Ein’s, reciting a lyrical chant. To Yu, it almost sounded like the strange poetry from the Gospel Code she would incant to unlock the Asura Frame’s pseudo-magic powers.

And that was when a miracle happened.

Yu examined himself in dumbfounded confusion.

“The Dharva are not the only ones who regain their magic in the akashic domain!” Ein said. “It isn’t much compared to the sages, but I, too, know the arcane ways!”

The Mark III stopped in midair, then shot back skyward. The anti-gravity lifters had recovered seemingly out of nowhere, but that wasn’t all. The Shroud unfurled itself from Yu’s arms and returned to his neck, billowing behind him like two thin wings, restoring the Frame’s stalwart silhouette. As it did, armor began to plate itself over his shoulders, down to his fists.

“You healed the Mark III with magic!” Yu realized.

“Perceptive as always!” Ein commended him. “The Asura is a breathing organism, as much machine as it is demigod. You’ll find that restorative spells know the difference!”

Out of all the things Yu had experienced, healing magic straight out of a video game had been relatively low on the list of things that he expected.

Revived, Yu rocketed up to meet the demon eye.

He was done messing around. “Let’s see how you like this!” he cried.

The scarf-shaped cloth undulated like an appendage, and the ends sharpened into the tips of swords. Transformed into an abridged Excalibur Mode, the Shroud lashed out like a whip, rending the Anomaly in half from cornea to retina.

The creature let out a horrible shriek from some unknown orifice, one last cry of defiance against all that was natural, and the abomination fell.

“Yu! We should leave while the Asura still holds!” Ein shouted up at Yu.

Yu’s visor, apparently agreeing with her suggestion, immediately displayed an escape route on his Head Mounted Display. A render of the castle showed the way out with corresponding arrows.

“Up! Got it!” said Yu.

Four towers stood at each of the cyclonic palace’s corners. Yu landed on one of the sixth-floor balconies and quickly took his partner in his arms. The Replicant girl lay across them like a bride, lending all of her weight with complete trust, and she nodded once. Soundly.

They took off towards the ashen sky, between the gliding spiral masses, and the eerie ceiling of the Void grew nearer. As they ascended, Ein broke into a handsome, knightly grin, undaunted by the unnerving nature of their situation, nor by the danger of flying utterly unprotected.

She laughed in the face of it all. “You know, I’d love to do this again at our wedding!”

“Yeah, no thanks!” Yu shot back.

“Really?” she asked. “I think a ceremony in the sky would be very ‘us.’”

“Since when were we even—”

“*I do hope you’re not leaving so soon!*” a voice boomed from the heavens. It echoed across the expanse from nowhere, cutting the duo’s bickering short. Quldald’s declamation shook the very air. “*There is still so much merry to be made!*”

An innumerable mass of floating eyes suddenly hovered in their path.

Ein growled. “He’s trying to overwhelm us!”

They looked to be the same species as the demon before, but comparatively much smaller. Only about two meters in diameter. What they lacked in size, however, they made up for with sheer numbers. The Mark III counted 372 entities, along with their designated name: beholders.

Ein tightened her arms around Yu’s neck and frowned. “There’s too many,” she said. “The Doomsday Book is our best hope, but I fear for the Asura’s condition.”

“Then our secret weapon’s out.”

“This will be a difficult battle,” Ein admitted. “Yu, if it’s between my life or yours…”

“It won’t be,” Yu stated. “You’ve done enough. It’s my turn now.” Ein raised her eyebrows at him. A window in the corner of Yu’s view revealed a single number: five billion. Up from one-point-two billion during his prior battle with Scullchance. “Thanks to your magic, we don’t need a secret weapon. We’ve got plenty of nanomachines to pull this off!”

“Droids! Right!”

Ein began to chant.

—Witness the truth. Envision vajra.

—See, says the Enlightened One, true strength in tathata.

—Give form to invincible serenity, flawless as the full moon.

The Asura Frame’s very own support satellite—Avalo—uploaded the Gospel Code at Ein’s behest, and the Mark III’s Ars Magna Unit responded to the command in kind. Twinkling adaptive nanofactors cascaded out from the suit armoring Yu’s body, cultivating into pairs of auxiliary droids.

The first to come into being were the MUV Crow Gauntlets—humanoid yet robotic arms, nimble enough for handwork, deadly enough for offense, and pointed at the fingertips with long, sharp talons. The clawed gloves attached themselves onto the length of the Mark III’s arms. Following the gauntlets were a set of long, metal casings that coupled with the Frame’s legs. MUV Launcher Boots (complete with missiles and other firearms). Next, a pair of armored platings locked together on the Frame’s torso in the shape of an upside down V, like the wings of a jet, forming the MUV Wing Cloak.

All these droids together merged to create a reinforced suit twice the size of its Devicer, the Full-Armor Mark III—a popular toy figure and one of Ijuin’s personal favorites.

Last came the MUV Airmobile. Simply put, the thing looked like a sleek jet ski. If a jet ski had arms at the front with opposable thumbs, that is. The limbs gripped the Mark III’s shoulders and latched into place on its back while Ein swung over to take the front seat. She held tight onto the handles, a position much more secure than when she was in his care, Yu thought.

The archmage’s voice came again, an excited moan. “Vexing! So very vexing! To think you had hidden such a form from me!”

“This isn’t a fashion show!” Yu snapped.

He charged into the wall of beholders, and from the oversized eyeballs came an assailment of magic. 372 against 1. Not great odds.

“Looking at it from another perspective,” said Ein, “I don’t think you’ll need to aim your attacks. Run wild, Yu!”

“Good point!” he agreed. “Let’s do this, Mark III!”

A maelstrom of bullets and rockets ejected from the Frame’s enhanced legs all at once. Even the demons that somehow emerged unscathed from

the smoky barrage met a brutal end, delicate flesh ripped to shreds by the gauntlets' talons, meat blended by ultrasonic oscillators and charred by high voltage currents. Yu unleashed every gruesome weapon that could prove effective in the moment.

The enemy attacked chaotically and ceaselessly from all directions. Rays of light, sound waves, blasts of heat, hexes, curses. The anti-magic shell never stopped glowing for a second, nullifying spell after spell. And through it all, Yu tore his way higher and higher into the sky. The gray deepened as he did, fading into darker and darker shades of black.

"We're almost there!" Ein shouted.

"I can see the stars!" Yu cheered.

A single moment later, and they soared through a blanket of twinkling lights. A penumbra below reflected the light on a liquidy mirror. The sea. Yu recognized where they were. It was the Sea of Japan, and this was Maizuru. The portal-keep had brought them all the way back to the start.

Yu was just thankful he knew how to orient himself, and pointed them southwest.

He didn't bother reversing the Full-Armor state. With Ein on his back, Yu bolted straight for Osaka Bay as fast as he physically could. Right to Nayuta. Right to his friends.

The fine tones of a handsome man echoed at his back.

"I will cede the field for now, warrior of black and gold," the archmage declared. "But I eagerly await the day we meet again. With bated breath."

Chapter 2: A City on the Sea

1

Yu and Ein blitzed through the thickly wooded and rocky Kyoto-Osaka area in a fraction of the time they had taken to make the journey on foot. The Mark III, still functioning properly for the moment, carried them the entire length in under half an hour. The healing magic had worked wonders for Yu's condition, and now his only worry was the exposed girl riding behind him.

"Are you cold?" Yu asked, raising his voice over the wind. "Can you breathe okay?"

"I'm well," she replied. "The Asura's Aerocite—that is, the anti-gravity lifters—can create fields of gravitational effect. Feel free to increase our speed. I'm more than protected."

"Will do!"

The sunken remains of the Osakan megalopolis swept beneath them until they came to the ocean proper, where Osaka Bay would have normally begun had it not swallowed the city and become the Great Kansai Bay.

They cut across the sea, when something caught Yu's attention on his display. "A message," he said. "From the colony!"

"'Welcome home, our prodigal son,'" Ein repeated the commlink aloud. "It seems they're glad to finally have our location."

The Mark III soared over Wakayama Bay at last, the navigation system guiding their flight and indicating their location with a glowing indicator on the map. Every second brought them closer to Nayuta, and Yu's heart leaped at the prospect of seeing his friends again.

"Hey," Yu said. "I'm picking up gunfire."

His sensors captured the distant crack of assault rifles, and a new window streamed footage of a ship parked on the water. It didn't look big enough to be a destroyer, but it definitely belonged to the Naval Defense. A patrol boat, most likely. Fairly modest in size, at fifty or so meters in length.

The crew had come under attack by a wooden sailboat. Anomalies scurried across a long, aged gangplank connecting the two ships, wearing tattered clothing and wielding shortswords and hand axes. In fact, their forms looked very familiar.

"Are those humans?!" Yu exclaimed.

The disturbingly hominid faces of the archmages he had faced over the last few hours passed through his mind, as well as the nauseating possibility that these Anomalies shared those similarities. But a closer look at the enemies and the ship they were boarding from relieved his concerns.

"Yu! That crew is not alive!" Ein warned. "The pirates are undead, and the sailors won't last long using conventional weaponry!"

The rogues shambling from the rotten and decrepit sailboat were zombies. Flesh hung from their bones, exposed and decaying, or at least

from those that still had flesh, anyway. They weren't at all fast and shuffled onto the modern patrol ship languidly, swinging their weapons around at the crew. The sight belonged on seas halfway across the world, centuries prior.

The officers, distinguished somewhat by their blue fatigues, countered with desperate machine gun fire, turning the already emaciated zombies into even gorier creations. But without delivering a decisive blow to the heart or head, it would do them little good.

And failing would yield nightmarish consequences.

The undead pirates moved dully, but it was matched with indomitable strength, and if one got too close to an unfortunate victim, it was only a matter of time before a set of yellow teeth would be sinking into their sinews. And there were so *many* of them. They seemed to spawn infinitely from the sailboat.

"It's…saying the ship *itself* is an Anomaly," Yu murmured.

"That's right," Ein replied from behind. "It births the monsters. Until their cord is cut, the dead will continue to walk."

The HMD in Yu's visor listed the Anomaly as a "ghost ship" and designated its threat level BBB.

"We need to help them," Yu said. He hovered above the embattled ships. "We need to help them…but I can't even tell who's who down there!"

The Mark III, fifty meters in the air, counted eighteen enemy zombies on the patrol ship's deck. Twenty-two officers—twenty-one in the time it was taking Yu to think.

He had to act fast.

The skirmish was chaos. Firing a weapon or deploying droids haphazardly would only endanger fellow humans. But he couldn't take out each zombie one by one. He didn't have that kind of time.

"Do we release the droids?" Ein asked urgently.

"No," Yu finally responded. "It'd take too long. I have a better idea." He unlatched the droid Ein was riding from his back. The MUV Airmobile was originally used to transport auxiliary troops or special forces, so as long as it had a source of power and propulsion, it could fly rather reliably on its own. "Will you be okay by yourself? I don't want you to fall."

"In my home kingdom, Aerocite was used to lift entire cities," said Ein matter-of-factly. "A single droid is nothing. I could float here for a hundred years!"

Convinced enough to leave her to her own devices, Yu descended to the deck. Rapidly. The full-armored Mark III landed harshly on one knee with enough force to send a reverberating thud throughout the patrol ship, but it was almost perfectly silent. A feat made possible by the anti-gravity lifters. And just as well. Neither friend nor foe had taken note of Devicer Three's entrance.

"Okay. Mark III, I need the, uh, inca…pacitative…" Yu searched his brain for the thing's name. "Incapacitative…paralytic? Sound propagator?"

At the final utterance, the weapon activated and a horrible, grating whine resonated from the incapacitative paralytic sound propagator in the nano-armor's chestplate. Anything with a nervous system would fall into shock upon hearing it and temporarily go limp, thereby non-lethally subduing any potentially violent individuals. Of course, that included the men on the deck. The twenty-ish navy officers collapsed on the spot at the atrocious sound, like metal shrieking through glass.

They fell twitching, faces frozen in looks of horror as they realized that their hero, Devicer Three, had just attacked them. The one they should have been able to trust above all else.

Yu's plan was going swimmingly. He stood, stretching out his droid-enhanced arms and spreading the elongated fingers of the MUV Crow Gauntlets. From each of their tips, superhardened calcium bullets erupted, propelled by hyper-compressed bursts of air. The attack didn't even need the Full-Armor form. It could be used with the base Frame.

Crackling gunfire filled the air, a storm of bullets turning the zombies into hole-ridden ant hills from the chest up. The invading pirates' hearts and brains were minced in a matter of seconds.

The paralyzing sound had only been to keep the sailors out of harm's way. The undead, conveniently, didn't have functional nervous systems.

"Three," one of the fallen men gasped, realizing the Devicer's intent. "This was your plan."

"You were trying to protect us," another murmured.

Tears brimming with emotion welled in their eyes. But Yu still had a job to do.

He kicked into the air once more, just above the undead-spawning ghost ship. Even as he did so, the door to the hold opened and a new mob of Anomalies came pouring onto the sailboat's deck, unsteadily making their way towards the patrol ship.

"Holy Shroud! I need you!" Yu cried.

The ends of the scarf around Yu's neck spread out like the wings of a bird before poofing out a cloud of sparkling particles which glowed the same yellow hue as the cloth that had scattered them. The golden smoke swallowed the ghost ship whole, each speck of dust a piece of the Holy Shroud itself. And despite the weapon's mysterious nature and its seemingly endless abilities, one thing was certain about it—it felled the undead decisively.

Both the zombies and their ship crumbled, evaporated by the Shroud's purifying dust.

As the paralysis started to wear off, the officers began to whoop and cheer.

"Three! Number Three! You're alive!"

"Hey!" one of them shouted particularly frantically. "It's me! Sakuma! Where the hell have you been, Mizuki?!"

Men began to stumble to their feet, pointing at the Mark III in the sky, and one young officer even seemed to have known Devicer Three personally. Yu's heart skipped a beat. Shinichi Mizuki had been his name. The name of the Devicer Three before him.

There was no point in lingering. Yu returned at once to where Ein was waiting for him, rejoined with the auxiliary droid, and accelerated towards Nayuta.

"Wait!" the man shouted. "Mizuki! Listen to me!"

The stranger's voice seemed to chase after him with as much tenacity as the archmage's had.

About twenty minutes later, the Mark III alighted on the roof of Central Tower, the floating city centered around it blanketed in night. Yu let Ein down, then de-armorized.

"Guys!" he exclaimed. "You're still up?"

"You think we'd be *sleeping* while you were still out there?" Aliya scoffed, then smiled. "We haven't made it until we've *all* made it."

"I believed in you, bud! I knew you two were gonna be okay!" Ijuin cheered.

"So what happened out there?" Natsuki asked. "You better have brought a good story back with you at least."

They were all there. Waiting for him. Ijuin, ever the softy, held his fist out with tears in his eyes. His partner, the friend he had experienced every joy and sorrow with for the last year, bumped it with his own fist, and the two nodded at each other.

The journey was finally over. Yu had never felt a smile on his face quite as nice as this one.

Meanwhile, Ein stared past them. "So you are Nadal," she said. "One of the five Wise Ones in service to my mother."

She regarded the spindly elf curtly. She saw through his fine features, his disciplined, buzzed hair. The look in his wide eyes did little to hide the peculiarity behind them.

"How grateful I am to see you well, Your Highness," the sage replied. "Honored am I that you grace us with your presence." He was wearing a hooded robe, folded at the front like a kimono. The more Yu looked at it, the greater his suspicion grew that he'd seen it before. In a famous sci-fi film. His tone and speech were practically oozing pretension. "We find ourselves in a state of emergency. A state of great need for the noblesse key to Avalo and the Astral Library therein. As such, we will have much use for you and the new Devicer Three."

Yu blinked at the man's stark words. "U-Use?"

Ein shrugged, seemingly accustomed to the pompous diction of those in power. "You never change," she sighed. "Pay him no mind, Yu. He simply subsists on being rude, juvenile, and utterly asinine. For a man-child, though, he's remarkably shrewd. Try to be courteous."

“Uh, sure,” said Yu.

“Indeed, my insight is as valuable as gold,” Nadal boasted. “And my first wise decree is that you are to undergo a physical examination tomorrow morning with our Asura Frame and nanomedicine specialists. Understood? Don’t forget now.”

Ijuin’s warning suddenly ran through Yu’s head.

“I wouldn’t stay armorized for long periods of time. I got this weird feeling while I was digging around.”

“An image. A bad one. Like gears that don’t really fit together. You’ll probably be fine in ten, twenty-minute bursts, but if you keep it up for hours at a time, we might, uh, have some trouble.”

A mere forty minutes of battle had been enough to cause Yu to black out. Whatever this condition was, it wasn’t good.

2

Yu had arrived at Central Tower at approximately one in the morning, so when he and his friends found their guest rooms on the fifty-fifth floor, it didn’t take long for sleep to take them. Each room was fully powered, and even came equipped with air conditioning and a refrigerator. But the final blow for Yu had been the hot shower. After that, he was out before his head had even hit the pillow.

Modern society was alive and well. How he had missed it.

The next morning at eight, Yu pried himself from his dreams to meet the others at the cafeteria on the same floor as their rooms. It was packed but otherwise very neat and clean.

He spotted Ein, Ijuin, Aliya, and Natsuki in a corner and carried his tray of food over to their table, then wasted no time testing the fare.

“Oh my gosh, I haven’t had a cucumber sandwich in forever,” Yu moaned as he chewed. “The veggies are so fresh, and the margarine might as well be butter. I could cry.” He took another satisfying bite, finding the cucumbers moist and crunchy. His salad plate was a colorful canvas of vegetables. “They seriously synthesize all this in the tower?”

Aliya nibbled on her BLT, sans the B. “Mmhmm. Sixty floors in total, but most of them are used for manufacturing,” she answered. “Vegetables, meats, dairy products—even milk. And it’s not just food either. Anything someone would need to get by in daily life, they make it.”

Used to be a lot of places growing plants indoors, Yu thought to himself. He was a bit of an oddity for a fourteen-year-old, in that he preferred vegetables to junk food and cooked for himself more often than not.

“Okay, but this synthetic meat’s dryer than a desert and smells like medicine,” Ijuin griped. “Some *real* meat’d be nice.”

Ijuin, on the other hand, was firmly in camp carbs-and-fat supremacy, and was consequently displeased with the menu. Every bite of his white imitation burger made his shoulders sag a little deeper.

Natsuki grimaced at her own meal. “Yeah, thing kinda looks like an overcooked, underseasoned chicken breast.”

“An integral part of the sage’s path is the spiritual abstention from meat,” Ein explained. Her grin widened. “Our people aren’t very carnivorous in nature to begin with, so one can hardly trust them to replicate it with any degree of accuracy.”

Ijuin seemed to take personal umbrage with the clone elf’s delight at her precious, Naruto Kintoki-grade sweet potato.

“I mean, there’s other humans here besides us, right?” he grumbled. “Would it kill ’em to let the experts bring some stuff in? Like, come on, I’ll even take fish.”

“Sorry, but no,” someone chimed in melodically. A sage woman sat nearby. The hem of her flowing, blue robe, draped over a long dress, brushed against the floor. She was beautiful, naturally, but there was a kind of gentleness in her countenance that accentuated her youthful glow. “This is a holy place—mere paces away from a Wheel of Orison—and we conduct ourselves with respect and reverence in such company. Is that understood?”

“Er. Yes, ma’am,” Ijuin said at once, defeated by the tiny woman’s verbal prowess. “Sorry, ma’am.”

The migrant elf smiled, satisfied, and turned to Yu. “I’ve heard of you, Yu Ichinose. The Devicer who awakened Rudra, the Asura of sky. And you.” She looked at Ein. “Your face is one I remember fondly.”

“As is yours, it seems,” the Replicant girl replied. She was silent for a while as she searched her memory. “You are High Priestess Azalin, one of my mother’s Wise Ones. Am I correct?”

“Correct you are,” she said. “Currently, I supervise matters regarding the twelve Asura Frames, and I suppose you could call me the caretaker of the temple.” Azalin gracefully lowered her head. “To the artificial gods of destruction.”

“Still can’t believe it.” Ijuin took in the fresh outside air. “Prayer Wheels. The Asura Frame’s power source. Some crazy stuff, huh?”

A massive wheel of fifty-five meters in diameter slowly turned in front of him. The metal framework around it almost made it look like a Ferris wheel without gondolas. Massive though it was, the structure was actually quite understated, especially sitting behind the three-hundred-meter Central Tower.

Ijuin huffed in excitement. “Man, but just look at that thing! It’s just like the one on the Mark III!”

“Except the Mark III’s is a real one. A Wheel of Orison brought all the way from Param on the other side,” Aliya elucidated smartly. “Small enough

to fit on a belt, powerful enough to generate more energy than an entire power plant, and with absolutely zero emissions. It can turn wind, sunlight, water currents, even gravity waves into electricity and mana. There's a reason the elves consider it a national treasure."

"But what's this 'Wheel of Orison' business about?" Ijuin tilted his head. "What's that mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like," Aliya stated matter-of-factly. "The souls of elvish sages, monks, and high-ranking priests from all throughout history reside in it, and the forces of the natural world—earth, water, fire, wind, and the void—fuel them, turning their prayers into power. Apparently you can even hear it chanting sometimes."

"And this big fella is the Earth equivalent," Natsuki remarked, studying the oversized, mock Prayer Wheel with interest. "I'm gonna assume bigger doesn't mean better, does it?"

"Unfortunately not," said Aliya. "It's far less efficient than the Mark III's, or any of the Asura Frames' for that matter. They had to make a lot of concessions and contrivances to replicate the originals, and as you can see, it came at the cost of portability."

"Hey, if it works!" Natsuki casually grinned. "Even doubles as a tourist attraction. And if the ghost priests say we can't have meat or alcohol, then not much we can really do to argue."

"I hear doing that can actually decrease its output," Aliya murmured.

Ijuin sighed heavily. "Ugh, fine, I'll suck it up." He looked up, but not at the Prayer Wheel. He turned towards Central Tower behind him. "Wonder if everything's going all right with Ichinose."

Yu and Ein had gone to the medical center with High Priestess Azalin. The other three had come to check out the Prayer Wheel to kill time in the meanwhile, but one could withstand only so many tedious revolutions of the big turbine before going insane.

They wrapped up their sightseeing and were heading back around to the entrance, when Natsuki perked up. "Army guys. And they look even more uptight than usual."

A few dozen uniformed Defense Force officers were gathered at the tower's front door. A military truck was parked nearby.

Ijuin, familiar with machinery as he was, took one look at it and frowned. "It's not electric. They're seriously driving that thing around?"

"It's gas-powered? In today's world?" Aliya said, flabbergasted. "Where are they even getting fuel from? International trade's dead and Japan can hardly make its own without importing oil."

"Old 'patriots,'" Natsuki said sarcastically, "tend to have trouble adjusting to change." She shrugged. "Could be that they ran here quick and never saw things get bad on the mainland. If that's the case, I could totally see them burning all that gas thinking everything'll be back to normal any day now."

"That sounds depressingly plausible," Aliya moaned.

“Actually, I remember seeing a Naval Defense ship at the harbor too,” Ijuin added.

The self-proclaimed ex-high schooler was as detached as ever, but the younger middle schoolers felt an indescribable foreboding in the air, and looked at each other with concern.

“The Mark III belongs to your people, right?” Yu remembered Aliya telling him as much. “But I think it’s fused with my body. Will you be able to take it out?”

“Oh, of course we can,” Azalin assured him in her cute, melodic voice. “We’ll pluck Rudra’s nanofactors right out and leave your own body perfectly intact. It would be rather hard to conduct maintenance otherwise, don’t you think? Why else do you think you’re here?”

“In that case, you can keep it,” Yu said flatly. “I’m returning it to you.”

The Asura Frame belonged with its legitimate owners. Yu’s claim on it had ended. Their long and treacherous journey was over. He didn’t need it anymore.

He wanted to believe he didn’t need it anymore.

Azalin’s soft features twisted in shock. “But you and the Asura are one,” she said, pitch rising. “Don’t you feel strong together? Why in the world would you want to sever that bond?”

“I’m inclined to agree with her,” Speaker Nadal interjected. “Yu Ichinose, the fact of the matter is we don’t *want* you to return it.”

They were on the fiftieth floor—Central Tower’s nanomedical facility. Yu lay on a bed, dressed in a blue patient’s gown, while some kind of device scanned his body. An MRI for nanomachines, apparently.

“It would be squandered in anyone else’s hands, meaning yours are where it belongs. It’s only logical. Don’t you agree?” Nadal never looked up from the monitor, analyzing Yu’s combat data. “After all, what would we be without logic, reason, or sophism?”

“Regarding the latter,” Ein said from the other bed, “I’m fairly certain my mother’s answer would be, ‘better people.’”

She was attached to the same device as Yu and wearing the same outfit. Her quip had given Yu the momentum and courage to press further.

“Just because I can use it doesn’t make it mine though,” he argued.

“Semantics. It’s not that you can ‘use’ it,” Nadal shot back. “You can *harness* it.”

Everything Yu had seen, everything he had heard, everything he had fought with the Mark III was being replayed at high speed for the sage. Various graphs described his velocities, power and magical energy outputs, as well as a myriad of other combat-relevant sets of data. On top of the endless diagrams of environmental statistics and figures, the amount of information was nauseating, but Nadal needed only three minutes to review every bit of it.

A screen saver replaced the data on-screen and Nadal finally looked at Yu.

"The numbers speak for themselves," he said. "You're better. In every aspect. All across the board, you eclipse your predecessor, upon whom I refuse to waste the calories to remember his name. And that is because, by design, the Asura Frame is only as strong as its bond with the Devicer."

"Nadal, that man died a warrior's death," Ein interrupted sharply. "Show him due respect."

"Apologies," Nadal replied flippantly. "Anyway. Yu Ichinose, Rudra has chosen you, and as such your heightened parameters are to be assumed. The more statistically significant difference between you and your predecessor is your combat experience. You see, the prior Devicer toured with the Asura for two years and five months." His eyes sharpened. "And yet, your resourcefulness, adaptability, awareness, your judgment on the battlefield—they all exceed his own. Few Devicers have ever been able to harness the Asura Frame quite like you can."

Azalin nodded. "He might even be on the same level as Avalo's guardian, Devicer Nine."

Ein's very being seemed to swell with pride. "Isn't he amazing? I saw those exact qualities in him myself," she bragged. "And they're precisely how he won over the Asura, as well as my heart. I can imagine no partner more worthy to bear the King of the Storm's armor."

"S-Stop giving people weird ideas," Yu stammered.

Yu's suffering, however, was Azalin's delight, and her eyes suddenly shimmered. "Oh, goodness, I had no idea you two were involved like that! That's so romantic!"

"Your Highness, should you feel the need to fornicate, please do so outside the tower's premises," Nadal commented without missing a beat. "Sages are known to sire children, of course, but we keep our animalistic tendencies *away* from holy grounds. Or otherwise in a lab where artificial fertilization can take place."

The speaker had hardly even blinked when the door to the testing room opened and a young man, a human, barged in. His black jacket, white button-down, and necktie identified him as being from the Naval Defense, and according to the rank depicted on his arm patch, he was a captain.

"Speaker!" he shouted. "Where is Devicer Three?!"

"Devicer who?" Nadal asked calmly, cocking his head slightly without so much as flinching.

"Cut the act! Major Mizuki's been missing for over *six damn months*, but I saw him! I saw him with my own eyes! He saved my life!"

"Interesting. We'll have to proceed with an investigation."

Yu realized something as he listened. The aggravated young officer's voice was familiar. And then he remembered the patrol boat from the night he had escaped the portal-keep. There had been a man who seemed to have

known the last Devicer Three, and he had called out to Yu as he left. Yu remembered his voice.

It was this man.

Yu's heart skipped a beat, but luckily, the officer appeared uninterested in the middle schooler laying on the MRI bed.

"I recall some of the new refugees gossiping about the same thing," Nadal mused. "If even you, Captain Sakuma, claim to have sighted him, then there can be no mistake. Yes, I will contact you as soon as I learn something!"

All the while, Devicer Three simply lay there, and Nadal hardly even blinked.

3

"You can't armorize?!"

"They pulled the Mark III's particles out of me," Yu clarified to Ijuin. "It took almost an hour."

The bed of the kei truck jostled and swayed uncomfortably, even at the slow speed they were going, and the wind whipped by their ears, though not enough to obstruct conversation entirely. Once Yu's examination was finished, they had borrowed an electric vehicle to take out into the town.

Natsuki sat at the wheel, with Aliya beside her.

"It's not so bad in the tower," Natsuki said. "I wouldn't exactly say 'no' to a nice apartment up there."

"Us ordinary people would get sick of how quiet it is before long, though," said the younger girl.

"Well, there's plenty of fun outside, I bet."

"Nothing's more unbearable to humans than boredom, after all."

The central block of Nayuta was a pure world. Sanitary. Ponds dotted the landscape and irrigation canals wound like streams through the trees of the block's forest section. Small birds chirped from the branches while brooks bubbled beneath.

It was the perfect place for a nature stroll, but nature was the last thing on the teenagers' minds after the collapse of modern society. What they wanted was that long-lost bustle and energy of a busy city.

"I sympathize," Ein said, speaking loudly over the truck bed's racket. Otherwise, though, the bumping seemed to bother her very little. "I respect the sages' ways and customs, but living with them?" She gave a profound and knowing look. "That's something entirely different."

It was a clear spring day and just about lunchtime. Which was exactly what had brought the group to the edge of the outer block.

Natsuki parked the car in a lot near the ocean, and at last the swaying ceased. The "lot" was half-filled and really more of a thin layer of gravel than anything else. A short walk away was an open plaza filled with vendors and stands sheltered by sheets of cloth, like a humble little food market or a foreign bazaar.

“What sounds good for lunch?” Natsuki asked cheerfully as she let her nose guide her across the food at nearly every stand they passed. “They’ve got all sorts of stuff!”

“Easy. Meat!” Ijuin answered at once. “Guys, they’ve got roasted chicken thighs over there! Look at how crisp that skin looks.” He glanced down. “What the…?! Look at that *price*!”

“Yeesh, fifty-two hundred yen for one leg,” Yu read off of the sign, wincing.

The cost of living here was evidently just as steep as it had been at the refugee town on the Great Kansai Bay’s coast.

Natsuki, well-accustomed to such price gouging, pointed a ways down and said, “It’s only a thousand for one skewer down that way.”

“Wait, Natsuki. It says ‘poultry.’ You can’t assume they mean specifically chicken,” Aliya interjected. She narrowed her eyes. “That’s definitely shady. It could be anything.”

The ever-dauntless Replicant girl stepped forward. “Then let us clarify. Excuse me, shopkeep!” she called out. “I have a question for you. What manner of fowl does the ‘poultry’ on your sign refer to?” The man answered. “Gull, you say? Is it good?”

It took the man a moment to recover from being entranced by Ein’s attractiveness and the sight of her pointed ears. “Nope, but most folk don’t care so long as it’s meat,” he replied spiritedly. “And it’s a whole lot easier to get my hands on than any land bird.”

“I see. So it’s a seafowl,” Ein surmised.

“Y’know, we don’t get many of you elf scientists down here often.”

“Oh, no, I’m no sage,” she corrected the man. “I imagine you’ll be seeing more of me in the future, so I’m glad we could have this meeting.”

“That so, eh?”

The way Ein was conducting herself was certainly becoming of the clone of an elvish queen, Yu thought to himself. Refined and cordial, yet candid and sociable. She seemed to be reveling in the conversation, in the experience of crossing racial borders, and it evoked the stereotypical image of a naive noblewoman. Ironically, though, it occurred to Yu that nobles probably interacted with more people than most.

Add to her affability an unfaltering confidence and a fearlessly outgoing nature, and you had Ein at the most fundamental level.

“Something tells me Ein’s a lot better with people than me,” Yu muttered.

“Well,” said Ein, “what’s our verdict? Based on my own hunting experiences, seafowl is not particularly appetizing, especially when there are available alternatives. Although, there is something to be said for being adventurous in youth.”

“You’re not inspiring a lot of confidence in me,” Aliya said.

The others weren’t all that convinced either. And so they found themselves drifting towards the inviting scent of charcoal and burning fish,

with Ijuin looking askance at the mystery meat and lamenting what could have been.

The vendor they ultimately ordered lunch from was selling a variety of fatty, in-season seafood, from mackerel to smelt-whitings to hairtails to even tiger shrimp. The fish were filleted and skewered, while the shrimp were similarly served on a stick but in sets of three, and at a higher price tag.

“At least it’s cheaper than the other meat,” Yu said.

“Ah, supply and demand,” said Ijuin. “It’s a good thing I like shrimp, but man, I’m seriously gonna start dyin’ for some nice, juicy beef or pork here pretty soon.”

“Look at those posters,” Aliya pointed out to the dynamic duo. “‘We accept won and renminbi.’ They’re all over the place. Honestly, those currencies are probably worth a lot more than the yen at this point.”

“Makes sense,” Natsuki commented. “Korea and China can still pass as actual governments.”

They meandered through the market, bags of food in hand.

“Hey!” Ijuin said. “Tables and chairs over there!”

He jogged over. Aliya and Natsuki followed behind.

“It looks like everyone else has the same idea,” said Aliya. “With all these people eating outside, it really does feel like a foreign night market or something.”

“Bit hard to go brick and mortar these days,” Natsuki added.

They found an empty table and laid out their spoils. Yu promptly stuffed his face with some of the grilled fish, followed by one of the salted rice balls they had found at a separate stall. It went without saying, of course, that a city surrounded by water boasted exceptional seafood. That is to say, it was delicious.

“Yu, this stretchy snack amuses me,” Ein remarked.

“I’d call mochi more of a meal than a snack, personally,” Yu replied.

Ein alone had chosen the sweeter, squishier of the two rice options, childishly stretching the rice cake out with her chopsticks between bites. Despite her blatantly poor manners, though, when it was Ein doing it, she did it with the grace of a highborn lady engaging in a bit of quaint fun.

Yu watched closely, wondering how one could possibly be so beautiful while doing something as mundane as eating, and his heart began to beat faster. This was the girl—the remarkable girl who had decided to make him the target of her advances. For some inscrutable reason.

But rather than pondering the unknowable, Yu redirected himself to more pressing issues.

“So by the way, guys,” he said. “We never really needed money back at the base, but we’ll probably run out before long now that we’re in an actual town.”

“Oh,” Ijuin said. “Huh. You’re right.”

“We’ll have to find jobs,” Aliya murmured. “I’d really rather not live with Uncle Nadal.”

“I can already see him putting his employees in cosplay,” Ijuin said forebodingly.

“I *knew* that’s what it was,” Yu muttered.

Youths looking for work and fretting over making a living was by no means uncommon—for developing countries, that is. There were probably minors just like them, worrying about the exact same thing, all over Japan in its current state.

But the oldest of the group had thrived in this situation, and she flashed a big grin. “Hell yeah, sounds to me like we gotta break into the industry! I was just thinking me and some friends from back at the refugee town needed to team up and put something together.”

“Oh, nice, Natsuki! Whadda you think, Ichinose?” Ijuin asked.

Yu blinked. “Me? Why would I be against it?”

“Bro, you’re…” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “You’re the new Devicer Three.” And then he spoke normally again. “Won’t the military and the elves be on you nonstop from now on?”

They couldn’t know who might be listening. A single mention of that one name could have been dangerous.

Yu saw the worry on his friend’s face and fumbled with his words. “I-I don’t know,” he muttered. “I don’t even have it on me right now, and I already told them they could keep it.”

He was it. He was the successor.

Hearing it put so plainly made Yu remember his foes: the archmage Quldald, a hero larger than life—and Scullchance of the Pride, a girl who appeared as delicate and deceptively beautiful as she was ferocious.

To be Devicer Three was to fight for others, amid the cheers of allies. To fight amid cheers and applause. But the face underneath—Yu—was no match for the archmages and he knew it.

But if only that were the most of his worries.

Their featureless faces emerged in his mind. The refugees. The sailors from the patrol ship. Strangers, all of them. And a silent whisper of a thought burgeoned, more in his heart than on his lips.

“Can I…really fight for these people?”

After lunch, it was finally time to relax. A small walk away from the food market was a busy street lined with improvised houses made of wood and scrap iron. It was full of energy, and people came and went from the buildings in great numbers. From restaurants to shops with all manner of inventory, the place was a veritable little business quarter.

“Everywhere’s gotta have cute girls,” Natsuki commented on the nature of some of the businesses. “Guess this is where they’re at.”

“And I bet their bosses call them ‘waitresses,’” Aliya said. “Yeah, I’m sure they’re *so busy* serving food all day. That’s *totally* all they do. Ugh, all men are the same.”

“Oh, I saw some places where they’re *definitely* not waitresses.”

“J-Just for the record,” Ijuin stammered, “that doesn’t apply to us. We’re innocent middle schoolers.”

“I won’t speak for you, Ijuin,” said Ein, “but I certainly can for Yu. He has no need for such diversions when his fated partner is already ready and willing.”

“Ready and willing for what?!” Yu cried. He hastily decided to change the subject before his cheeks could go any redder and pointed at a sign. “Anyway, look! There’s a karaoke place over there.”

“Huh?” Ijuin looked down the road. “Karaoke? How?”

There stood a small but cozy bar, already bustling with drinkers in the middle of the afternoon. Among them were both men and women mingling, old and young alike. They could almost make out the vague melody of a song behind the tone-deaf singing. A peek inside revealed that the instrumental music was drifting from a speaker.

“Huh,” Natsuki said in amusement. “Back at my place, we played our own music on guitars and harmonicas. This place is high tech.”

“How are they getting any song files to play without internet?” Ijuin wondered, bemused.

After everything fell apart, the phrase “look it up” lost its meaning. When the government sparked the Evacuation by telling its citizens to flee, much of Honshu was already underwater, and the rest of the world’s northern hemisphere hadn’t been any better off. All servers and lines in the capital were destroyed, and now the digital world was as barren as the real one. Even if you somehow managed to have internet access, possibly via satellite, there wasn’t much to see anymore.

And yet they could hear the music flowing through the bar’s speaker. Ijuin was perplexed.

“Maybe it’s some instrumental they downloaded before the Evacuation?” he supposed.

“I don’t think so. It sounds like it was made for karaoke specifically.” Aliya’s long ears perked up with a gentle twitch as she listened. It used to be one of the top pop songs. “If I had to guess, I’d say someone remade it from scratch using MIDI. Who knows where they found the song itself, but people with perfect pitch, like me, could definitely recompose a track by ear.”

“Interesting,” Ein said. “There are bound to be skilled tradesmen among so many people. All it takes, then, is a little profiteering spirit, and innovation is born.”

As the princess so grandiosely put it, despite the year of struggle and setback after the collapse of urban life in Japan, the city of Nayuta was flourishing in its own way. There were libraries stocked with manga, novels, and even e-books downloaded onto tablets and smartphones, all scavenged from the mainland. Small theaters were a popular distraction and could screen movies on DVD or Blu-ray. People could sell their knickknacks or

other handmade goods at flea markets, including home-brewed liquor that would have been extremely illegal in a normal world.

It wasn't perfect. But knowledge, creativity, and will had come together to create a rather impressive community. And as a matter of fact, one such product of human ingenuity was calling their names.

"Hey, a bathhouse," Yu pointed out.

"Did I hear 'bath'?" Ein said. "Let's go, Yu! It calls to me!"

All of a sudden, their next destination was decided.

4

The sound of splashing water was a comforting and welcome change of ambience. The three girls submerged themselves in the warmth, and they collectively let the tension drain from their bodies, pure bliss showing in their relaxed expressions.

"It is easy to neglect the luxury of a nice bath when life is lived traveling from one place to the next," Ein expounded. "A day without a bath is not a day complete!"

"The shower last night was enough to convince me," Aliya concurred.

"All this room makes it even better!" Natsuki added.

The women's bath was spacious yet still generously filled, and the wooden, midcentury modern style evoked a cozy and homely sort of nostalgic atmosphere. Water flowed freely from a faucet with the simple turn of a knob.

The luxuries Nayuta afforded thanks to its self-sufficiency were hard to resist, and the bath was exceptionally busy that afternoon. Women's chattering and gossiping voices echoed throughout the room. Ein's, Aliya's, and Natsuki's, of course, were among them.

"A floating city definitely has enough water," Natsuki remarked. "The worst part about it's just that power curfew thing, but that's really it. You can use computers, appliances, pretty much anything as much as you want during the day." She sighed blissfully. "For real, this is heaven compared to my old place. Keeping the water treatment system going was a pain and a half, and whatever water we got out of it we had to ration!"

"Have you always been camped in that refugee town?" Aliya asked.

"Nah," Natsuki replied placidly. "Wandered around a bit first. Went wherever my legs took me."

She grinned indifferently, before sinking deeper into the water. She was attractive and exceedingly self-aware of that fact. Her curves were curvy, but her abs were pronounced and her waist tight. In short, she was a knockout who could literally knock you right out if she wanted to.

"Doesn't this make you just wanna knock back a cold one?" she said.

"I'm assuming you don't mean a cold glass of water," said Aliya.

Natsuki cackled. "Come on, now, don't make it sound so bad. I was in high school! A few beers and a bottle of sake or shochu never hurt nobody."

"You were in *high school*!"

Compared to the curvaceous samurai girl, Aliya was very petite, and it wasn't quite that she was just short or skinny. Her very stature and build was delicate in nature. However, she *was* still a woman and had the distinct features of one. All in all, though, she seemed fragile enough to break if you handled her wrong, like a small piece of candy.

"Let me say this now before it's too late—keep your alcoholic beverages away from me," Ein stated.

"But whyyy?" Natsuki whined. "How else are we gonna bond and become BFFs?"

"You speak of the devil's water!" Ein cried. "A single sip of it is enough to turn wise men into shameless fools!" Out of them all, Ein was the most radiant. Thin in the waist but full in the bust and hips. There was not a single woman in the room who wouldn't have been jealous of her perfect hourglass figure. It was almost unfair. "I'd much rather spend time with Yu than in debauchery."

"You know, it doesn't seem like you two have taken things very far," Natsuki said. "Still in the hand-holding phase, huh?"

"I don't judge him for his boundaries."

"He's definitely that type," said Aliya. "He's never had a girlfriend, and he isn't the kind of guy who'd start a relationship just for fun. He takes everything seriously."

"He sure does," Natsuki laughed.

"But he's also pretty skittish. I bet if I jumped in, I could steal him right out from under you," Aliya teased.

"I will thank you not to complicate our healthily progressing relationship," Ein decreed. "All it takes is a single night alone for the tide to change, daughter of Chloe. Talk to me when you're prepared for what that means."

"Wait, how much of this is a joke?!" Aliya exclaimed.

The bathhouse was boisterous, but not so loud that one couldn't make out what the three rambunctious girls were chatting about. Not even the wall separating them from the men's section was enough to muffle their voices. As it turned out, true to the place's retro Japan aesthetic, the wall didn't actually reach all the way to the ceiling.

Yu and Ijuin could hear their every word from the other side.

"So what's your game plan, bud?"

"Plan? What's my *plan*?!" Yu blustered. "What would *your* plan be?!"

"Well, considering I'm engaged, I'd have to turn her down," Ijuin replied. "But to be fair, my parents are the ones who arranged it."

"Oh, really?" The gears in Yu's head creaked. "Wait. Okay, hold up. What did you just say? *Engaged*?!"

"Have I never mentioned it before? There was this family in my neighborhood in Yokohama who my folks had been close with for a long time, some stuff happened, and then they promised their daughter to the Ijuins' firstborn. Which is, y'know, me."

“I always knew you sort of grew up well-off, but that’s a whole other level.” Yu had always had a hunch as to Ijuin’s affluent upbringing, but he tried to be polite and had never asked about it outright. Suddenly, all that talk of vacation homes in Hayama, overseas family trips, and Sunday classical music concerts with his mother made a lot more sense. “So are you like, old money?”

“C’mon, like any of that matters anymore, am I right?”

Ijuin talked around it, but he didn’t deny it. Yu sighed. Some best friend he was. It had only taken him a year to learn something so basic about Ijuin’s personal life.

Ijuin’s lighthearted smile darkened. “Both my and my fiancée’s families evacuated to Fukuoka. Man, I wish I could make sure they’re safe! No internet, no emergency broadcasts. It’s drivin’ me crazy! Y’know?”

Yu was struck by his friend’s plea. His desperation. So heavily that he almost said something.

Why don’t I fly over and check?

Nayuta was on the opposite side of Shikoku, but with the Mark III, the leap to northern Kyushu was like walking across the street. Yu would have made the offer, had he not heard something first.

Some men were gossiping as they washed off their bodies.

“Did you hear someone spotted Devicer Three?” one of them said excitedly.

“I thought he was dead!”

“I bet he was just wounded and now he’s back in shape! Thank god, right? Not having to worry about Anomalies is a real load off our backs.”

“Maybe we’ve got a chance after all.”

The men talked with voices and faces full of hope. They were smiling. It wasn’t often they got to do that.

But Yu wasn’t.

He swallowed his words, and Ijuin peeked at the young Devicer with worry.

5

Yu wandered aimlessly through the business quarter. Alone. A short while ago, he and his friends had just gotten out of the bath and were discussing where they should eat dinner, but Yu had slipped away in the middle of it. Without so much as telling anyone.

He had no destination. His heart was in a blender and his head felt like it was going to burst. The voices played in his brain on endless repeat.

“Did you hear someone spotted Devicer Three?”

“Three! Number Three! You’re alive!”

The cheers of the hopeful.

“Semantics. It’s not that you can ‘use’ it. You can harness it.”

The expectations of Nadal.

“Well met, Vajra One, and welcome to my radiant abode. I am Scullchance of the Pride!”

“I must see that beauteous armor once more.”

The words of his enemies.

“What’s wrong with me…?”

Anxiety seized Yu’s stomach. But why? What was there to be stressed about? Hadn’t he successfully protected his friends? Hadn’t they made it to Nayuta? The worst that had happened was the…armorization incident.

Yu fought against the urge to retch. He felt heavy. Every step seemed like an impossible challenge.

He could use the Asura Frame. Harness it, even. Fight. Win. Protect. Kill.

Kill.

He could slaughter the Anomalies. He could bring the archmages to their knees.

Walking suddenly became too much. He squatted down on the side of the road to try and wait for strength to come back to his legs.

“Are you okay, Yu?”

He turned around and saw her. “Ein?” The Replicant girl. “How long have you been following me?”

“Since you left,” she said gently. “I didn’t want to disturb you if you wanted to be alone, but you looked unwell. I couldn’t leave you.”

She helped him up and led him to an alley where they could sit down. Yu leaned back against the thin wall of a shack and let out a deep sigh.

He turned to his partner as she sat next to him. “Thanks. I feel a little better.”

“I hardly need gratitude to be by your side. However, if you must thank me, I’ll accept your undying love as repayment.”

“Wh-Who said I was in love with you yet?”

“‘Yet’ indeed. It’s only a matter of time.” She flashed a coquettish grin. “The sooner you give up and let it happen, the better.”

Once the beating in his chest had subsided, Yu realized how much calmer he was. She was trying to cheer him up. And it was working.

“Sometimes being alone only makes the shadows seem greater than they are,” she said.

“Seems that way. I’ll remember that.”

It had been almost half a month since Yu’s first armorization. A lot of time for unseen stress to slowly build, and this was what happened when he let it reach the tipping point. Yu decided he wasn’t a fan of panic attacks.

“Do you dislike donning the Asura?” Ein asked.

“Of course not,” Yu replied. “It lets me protect everyone.”

That word—everyone—made him realize something. He wasn’t lying to himself. He *did* want to help people. That pretense was what made the fighting bearable. The problem was just…

“It looks like they’re having fun over there,” said Ein.

“You’re right. That’s a lot of people. And they’ve got something gated off.”

They could hear the excited hollers from where they sat. A short distance away from the alley was a rectangular field enclosed by an iron mesh and surrounded by a crowd of people. They were cheering, shouting, and raising their fists in the air with fevered passion.

Yu picked himself up, approached, and his jaw dropped.

“They’re playing soccer!”

“Ah, the sport you told me about.”

Inside the makeshift fence was a half-sized pitch carpeted with artificial turf. Each team was only seven players each, four short of the standard, and the game seemed to only be timed for a single ten-minute period. Men and women alike composed the teams, and people of all ages were participating; the oldest of them appeared upwards of forty. One group of players wore red vests over their clothes, while the other wore matching blue T-shirts.

They played hard, and when the game was over, the next two teams took the field and a new match began. Yu recognized this style of play.

“It’s like how they do it in street basketball,” he said. “It’s just a bunch of friends. The losing team drops out, and the other team plays the winners of the next match.”

It was a far cry from an official match played by professionals, that was for sure, but a lot of them clearly knew their way around a ball. They were fast, dexterous, and a few seemed to manipulate the soccer ball with the skill of a veteran player. Some of the plays they pulled off made the crowd go wild.

Outside the court, many of the spectators appeared to be exchanging money every time the teams switched. There was clearly gambling going on.

“So this is how they do it.” Yu realized what it all was. “There’s no TV anymore, so this is how the sports fans get their fix. People can watch, make bets, and the others get to have fun playing.”

“They look very passionate. Oh?” Ein pointed towards the field. The match was paused. One of the players had taken a nasty hit to the ankle, and he wasn’t getting back up again any time soon. It looked like they would have to forfeit. One of his teammates was shouting something to the spectators. “It seems they need a replacement. What a coincidence.”

“What? How so?”

Five minutes later...

Yu had replaced his glasses for sports goggles and donned a black vest over his shirt. He stood on the pitch with his teammates. Ein had found him a spot on the team rather easily—and one-sidedly, Yu thought.

The opposing team was in blue, and they were all visibly built men. Yu had already deduced that they weren’t strangers to the soccer field.

A teammate passed the ball to Yu, who caught it with the inside of his foot before firmly stepping on it. All without needing to look down. He

scanned the field and noted the positions of every player. An instant was all he needed. There were six total plus one goalkeeper on each team.

One of the blue-uniformed men made a mad dash straight for Yu, coming for the ball like a rabid animal. But by then Yu had already kicked it into the air, and it was flying towards one of his teammates on the far side of the field, straight between the defenders. The through ball reached its target successfully.

Yu lingered on the sensation for a moment. The feeling of that ball at his feet. He hadn't experienced it in months, but it was all coming back to him faster than expected. Even as he dwelt on such nameless emotions, though, Yu never took his eyes off the ball.

The flustered teammate shot for the goal. Miss.

The opponent took the offense, but with a single sloppy pass, Yu intercepted the ball and flipped the tables again. He passed it to the person nearest him, expecting a one-two, but he never received the return pass. Yu just couldn't find a rhythm with his team. Slowly, however, they seemed to realize that he knew what he was doing and began to trust him with the ball more. But the same went for the opposing team, and their defense tightened up.

Yu skillfully dribbled past the man in his way, only to find an even bigger man coming for him next. Already anticipating this, he turned around and let him collide with his back. Yu was small, even for an average middle schooler, so he was well accustomed to being outsized. Securing the enemy as best he could with his body weight, he passed the ball.

But the ball was stolen before his teammate could get control of it, and suddenly their goal was in danger—or it would have been if not for the excellent save by the young man playing as goalie. He kicked it back towards Yu.

"All yours, little man!"

Yu caught it beneath his foot beautifully. The keeper was good. Really good. He must have played in school or had been on a youth team like Yu.

The opponents' defense looked by the books. In that case, if they could keep the ball in as many places as possible, then they might just have a shot at the goal.

Yu never stopped moving. Careful to keep an eye on the defense, he focused on being open to passes, though there never was anyone with the omnipotence to know exactly when to send the ball back to him. As was to be expected from a casual game of street soccer, most people simply wanted to make a beeline for the goal and score some points.

Occasionally, when the ball *did* find its way to Yu, it only stayed there for half a second. He passed it left, right, backward, forward, barely dribbling it once or twice before kicking it off somewhere new. It was a simple and safe strategy, but a slow one. The clock was running out.

With seconds left, the ball came back to Yu. He dribbled it forward, cutting his way through the enemy's defense, prying his way in, and then, with a pitch of his leg, he launched it straight towards the goal.

The goalkeeper couldn't react in time, taken by surprise at the sudden and aggressive play. The ball flew through the lower left corner and slammed into the net.

"I don't know much about this 'soccer,' but I could tell that you were incredible!" Ein cheered. "You did amazing, Yu!"

He blushed. "That was…just luck."

That last goal had been the game point. They had won, one-to-nothing. The next game was already underway.

The Replicant girl scoffed and smiled. "Don't be so modest, Yu. I can tell when you're lying."

"Wait, really?!"

"You display the same keen discernment during combat. No movement of yours is without purpose. I know it. In fact, I'll wager a guess as to your entire thought process—you lacked for comrades of your skill, and thus the ability to coordinate. So, you manipulated the sphere throughout as much of the field as possible to lessen the probability of mistakes while you waited for your chance to score the victory point."

Yu had not a single retort. Ein had called herself a "warrior queen" at one point, and clearly she lived up to the title. Perhaps that was how she had seen through him so utterly, despite not knowing the first thing about the sport. There was probably only one other player who had noticed his strategy.

"You've worked up quite the sweat," she said. "I'll fetch some water."

"Oh, yeah. Thanks. Hey." Yu called out to her before she could leave. "Let's play together next time."

Ein smiled, and said, "I like that idea. It sounds fun!"

With that, she walked off. Leaving Yu to ruminate on the weight of what he had just done in private.

He had just asked a girl out.

He couldn't believe it. He had done it almost reflexively. That girl was just so magnetic, and somehow, no matter what they did together, Yu felt that he would enjoy it by the simple virtue of her company.

"You're not bad, kid," a voice called out to him.

It was the goalie from his team. He looked to be somewhere in his twenties, and his black hair was cut short—a stereotypical sports guy. And, more than likely, he was the only player on the field who had caught on to Yu's plan.

He had made sure Yu always got the ball when he caught the opponents' goal attempts, and what's more, he'd told the team to keep wide around the end. Just to go along with Yu's tactic.

“We gotta play again sometime,” he said. “Name’s Sakuma. These are kinda my stomping grounds.”

“Thanks,” Yu replied shyly. “I’m Ichinose.” Sakuma shook his outstretched hand. He was happy to hear the praise of an older athlete like him. But he couldn’t shake the odd sense of déjà vu. “Where did you learn to play?”

“The soccer club back in my school days. And then I kept at it after joining the Force.”

Yu’s breath caught in his throat. He had asked the question expecting to hear that Sakuma had been a pro or something. But now he remembered. Last night. The officer he had rescued on the patrol ship. And then that morning, the very same officer had barged into the MRI room demanding to know Devicer Three’s whereabouts. Yu hadn’t recognized him out of uniform.

“Oh, Ichinose. One other thing. I might be overstepping my bounds here, but hear me out,” Sakuma said. “Kids like you shouldn’t be hanging around those elves. There’s talk going around that the migrants are actually spies. They could be feeding info to the Anomalies as we speak, so watch your back.”

Sakuma was deadly serious. He shot Ein an unpleasant glance as she returned, and yet, Yu sensed no malice. Only innocent concern for a child’s safety.

Chapter 3: A New Life

1

Once, the wasteland beneath the waves had been known as Osaka. In its place now stood an ethereal fortress, floating atop the water on a lotus flower pedestal. The brilliant crystal walls were immaterial, phantasmal, and only once it crossed the border from Param on the other side did it take physical form, whereupon it would become both a portal *and* a keep for a monstrous military.

The archmage Scullchance of the Pride helmed this particular castle. The dainty girl was lounging on her golden-maned lion in the keeper's hall, and she made no effort to right her posture for her comrade.

"Good day to you, Quldald," she greeted. "Word reaches me that your nose is finding itself in places where it ought not to be. Particularly with the black-and-gold warrior who escaped my grasp."

"Word travels fast then," the handsome archmage replied. He smiled cheerfully. "It may relieve you to know that he escaped *my* grasp as well." The man in the blue robe was not physically present in the room. What spoke to Scullchance was only a projected illusion of the mage himself. It matched his elegant features perfectly, only with a more ghostly, translucent aspect to it. "Must you really fault me? You know how my restraint simply fails me in the presence of such beauty."

"As does your memory, it seems. Much more will fail you should you *continue* to fail to remember that the Lioness does not like her prey to be stolen from her." The girl's eyes narrowed slightly, an expression of stark impertinence. Her gaze, though lazily wistful at a glance, was indeed imbued with pointed anger. "I suggest you do not interfere with my hunt."

"My, how unfortunate this is," Quldald said with exaggerated distress. "For you see, I, too, have vowed to slay this one by my hand. And as you know, the duty of purging the western reaches of the region known as Japan falls to both of us." His mirage shimmered. "Whatever our course, whosoever shall slay the black-and-gold warrior—it matters not to the Awakened One."

"I should have known better than to expect courtesy from one such as you, Whirlwind."

Scullchance's eyes and mouth sharpened into a bloodthirsty sneer. "Perhaps I ought to teach it to you."

Quldald laughed. "Perhaps another time, my lady. What might escape the great Awakened One's watch might not his children. Let us avoid conflict for both of our sakes." The keeper presented a closed hand and opened it, revealing a twelve-sided object resting in his palm. On each face was a number, counting up from one to twelve. On Earth, it was known as a die. "No more words. Why not let fate speak them for us?"

"Yes," Scullchance agreed. "Let us see whose destiny is more worthy of facing the warrior. The numbers will show us."

The Chosen Dharva—or archmages, as the humans called them—did not regard the throwing of dice as a mere test of luck. To them, it was a very important ritual used to measure one's fate. The one more capable of commanding destiny, the one in fortune's favor, would roll the higher number.

Scullchance clutched her own twelve-sided dice in her willowy hand, and together they tossed them to the ground. When the rolling ceased, the top face of the illusory dice displayed an eight, while the real one presented a nine.

Scullchance giggled menacingly. "I believe we have our answer."

"Ah, and so close!" Quldald moaned. "So be it. I will stand aside and forward my efforts on the western front."

To most, this meeting would appear odd, meaningless. But to the archmages of Param, it meant everything.

Elsewhere, another meeting was taking place, and arguably one just as strange.

Jurota Shiba, acting as an impartial observer, did his best to make his awkward presence as inconspicuous as possible. Sitting in a row at the conference table before him was a group of the brightest, most elegant, and most peculiar individuals on the planet—the migrant sages.

"At last, our prodigal son has returned home."

"Rudra, the King of the Storm. The culmination of the foundation laid by the Mark 0 prototype, as well as the Mark I and II thereupon. The Mark III has come to answer our prayers."

"Colleagues! I've had a flash of brilliance! You must read my poem in Rudra's honor!"

"Ah... Moving. Eloquent. An exquisite piece, my friend!"

"Speaking of exquisite, the new Devicer Three is truly remarkable. Not only does he harmonize beautifully with the Asura Frame, but he even awakened the old royal blood."

"He is the chosen great traveler of the Path."

"All is as it should be, for all is as it is."

“Indeed, by the Three Vajras are we made ascended. We hapless souls adrift on the whimsical waves of destiny and the universe!”

A surge of laughter suddenly rose from the table. Shiba, try as he might, couldn’t for the life of him figure out what had been so funny. He might have been able to deal with the painfully high register of the conversation, but the inappropriately timed poetry and indecipherable interjections made the entire affair rather daunting for a plain old human. Of course, this *was* plain old to the elves.

Yeah, no, call the desk worker in for the esoteric convocation, he thought to himself. Leave it to intellectuals to be exceedingly unsociable. And he wasn’t even allowed to nap through the thing, for crying out loud.

“Shiba,” Nadal said from one of the seats in front of him. “About the dregs festering among the utterly decimated remnants of the Defense Force—oh, pardon me. I mean the brave and valiant souls who so courageously—and of course *intentionally*—ceded ground to the enemy thus *un*intentionally causing a domino effect of powerlessness ultimately leading to the Defense Force’s untimely demise. Those people. How are they?”

“Um. Right.”

Speaker Nadal’s sarcasm knew no bounds, a habit Shiba had become intimately aware of since becoming his military coordinator. Before that, though, Shiba had been a warrant officer for the Ground Defense until the collapse of leadership caused him to seek refuge at Nayuta. He’d gone to great lengths to keep his military service under wraps, but four months was all it took for Nadal to sniff him out.

“What do we have here? A Ground Defense reconnaissance officer with three years of experience as a drone operator?” he had been accused at the time. “If it’s all the same to you, your talents would be put to much better use with me than with that seagull you’re butchering.”

And so put to use Shiba’s talents were, as the military advisor to Nayuta’s own public defense militia. Quite the promotion for a man of almost thirty-two.

He typed on his laptop for a moment before various holograms were projected above the conference table.

“According to information gathered by our surveillance droids,” Shiba reported, “they plan to attempt to wrest control of the settlement’s primary facilities and usurp power for themselves. If you’ll direct your attention to this feed here...”

Next to his laptop were several small machines, finely crafted into the shapes of insects—house flies, ladybugs, antlions, and more. In one of the windows displayed above the table, footage was being streamed of several uniformed soldiers gathered in a large meeting room, conducting a clandestine meeting of their own. The sound data of their voices was parsed and transcribed into subtitles.

Nadal regarded the stream for a moment, then nodded. “Resorting to violence. As expected.”

“They’ve acted precisely as you said they would, speaker,” one of his colleagues remarked.

“So they have,” Nadal said, nodding again. “The bureaucrats and politicians seem to be under the impression that they deserve the same authority here as the one they practiced in the homeland they abandoned. Their squawking’s been a hindrance, and in order to quiet them, I’ve treated the Defense’s...remnants, or what have you, favorably. Allowed them to grow. In doing so, the squawking has diminished by well over thirty percent.”

The speaker recited all this like a mathematician explaining his formulas. Out of all of the speakers that comprised Nayuta’s council, Nadal Rafthul was considered to be the strategian of the group. And at first, Shiba hadn’t believed such a buffoon could possibly be as intelligent as everyone said he was. He’d written it off as another quirk of the elves when they called him as much.

But as the months went on, and as Nadal seemingly haphazardly dealt with the incessant and tiresome demands of mainland refugees on Nayuta’s policies, the old Diet members, ministers, and elite dignitaries started to finally shut their mouths. All it took was showing a bit of favor towards the military. A lot of skill, leadership, and charisma was required to be able to bring such a group of people to heel. A group of people who effectively held the power during peacetime, and the guns during wartime.

And Nadal took it further. By buttering up the Defense Force veterans and their young officers with special privileges, like priority access to fossil fuels, he not only fattened their egos, but created a rift between them and the civilians.

He practically neutered the old senior and general officers by giving them honorary titles with the militia and setting them up in fancy houses, Shiba recalled. The only ones left are the young folk holing up in that moored Aegis warship. And no one’s got a hotter head than a green soldier.

Shiba had been one of them, admittedly, but he held no special feelings for his old uniform. He did, however, feel a twinge of sympathy for the poor young officers dancing in the palm of Nadal’s hand. But only a twinge, before he focused back on the task at *his* hand.

“We must ready security droids for a possible assault,” a somber-looking elvish speaker said. “Counter preparations must begin at once.”

“Or perhaps we shall call upon the prodigal son,” a rather flamboyant elf added gently. Speaker Raghu El Lapan. His ash-blond hair flowed down to his waist, and his appearance stood out strikingly, even among the rest of the council. “That said, I hear there have been complications. High Priestess, you are well versed in the sciences that birthed Rudra. What say you?”

“Very little, save that the situation is...complex,” the angelic Azalin replied. “Readings show no malfunctions in either the device *or* its human aspects, yet Rudra remains in a catatonic state. Although the new Devicer

Three has regained possession of it, armorization success rates fail to exceed thirty percent."

"Strange, that," said Raghu El. "Very strange for a match so compatible."

Azalin ruminated for a moment. "The Asura Frame is a hybrid being. Both organism and machine. And it is the former that allows a god-given form to resonate with Devicers. Perhaps it is also what impedes it. Perhaps the problem lies not with Rudra, but with the boy."

2

"This is kinda fun!"

Ijuin was having the time of his life. Debatably he shouldn't have been, because he was supposed to be working.

Floor twenty-five of Central Tower was a research facility for autonomous droids, and Ijuin currently occupied the testing room. It was a wide-open area, mostly illuminated by sunlight and completely barren save for the next-gen drones, two laptops courtesy of Shiba (technically Ijuin's direct superior), and a touch pad control device. Several tiny droids were flying around the room—three of each in the shapes of a housefly, ladybug, and antlion.

They moved according to Ijuin's will in complete silence. Left, right, up, down, in loops, fast, slow… Watching them was kind of addictive.

"These are *way* easier than some helicopter drone!" A ring of light shone in his right hand.

Sitting a good distance away, the militia's executive officer, Jurota Shiba, had his eyes fixed intently on the boy's skill. "Man, those augmentations," he said, impressed. "How many are you controlling at once right now? Eight? Nine?"

"Honestly, I think we could bump it up to ten. Prob'ly more."

"We'll have to test that next time! Now if you can do the same with mid- or large-sized droids, you'd really be saving my bacon."

Shiba fiddled with the touch pad on his laptop, and a portion of one of the white walls slid away. Inside stood an upright, anthropomorphic robot and a quadrupedal doglike one. The very same droids they had seen patrolling the fields on their first ride to Central Tower.

Ijuin held out his right palm to them, and the link was established. At once the two droids marched forward, a quiet whirring coming from their limbs as they moved. He was pleased with the simplicity of the controls.

"Oh, I can remotely operate the Mark III's auxiliary droids too," he said.

"Perfect," Shiba replied. "We've got all these machines here, and they do the jobs we give them well enough on their own, but some things just need a human touch." He let out a subtle groan. "I'm in charge of operating them, since I used to fly old-gen drones. Problem is there's only so much I can do with old laptops. We were really hurting for someone with the right augmentations."

“Yeah, you gotta get ’em while you’re a kid or they don’t stick.”

“That, and you need to have the right aptitude,” Shiba added. “Not many do. *I* sure as hell don’t, and they put *me* in charge of the unmanned droid division.”

“I mean…” Next to Shiba’s laptop was a wireless apparatus very much like a video game controller, only bigger and with more buttons. Just earlier he had been using it to demonstrate operating the mechs. “You can fly these little bug things pretty well, can’t you? You sneaked them onto that Defense Force ship at the harbor, after all. I’d say that’s pretty dang impressive.”

“Maybe, but it’s mentally exhausting,” Shiba replied.

The bug-shaped machines flew about the room, powered by solar batteries and nano-motors. They were modern marvels and testaments to the power of nanotechnology.

Ijuin used the touch pad to replay the videos they had captured with their onboard cameras and microphones. The following footage showed a quiet meeting behind closed doors. The voices in the recording spoke about droid patrol routes, the elves’ combat capabilities and resources, as well as dates for the day of action.

The audio the high-tech drones had intercepted seemed highly confidential, and Ijuin wasn’t sure how comfortable he was with it.

“You positive I’m allowed to hear all this?” he asked. “I’m just a middle schooler, y’know.”

“More than positive. You and your friends are with the Asura Frame and Devicer Three. You’re also in extremely high demand with those nanomachines of yours. Plus, I’d be an idiot to treat any of you like children at this point. After the things you must’ve seen? In this day and age?”

That last bit hit close to home. For being ex-military, Shiba was surprisingly humble and down-to-earth. Nothing like the officers Ijuin had known personally. Shiba wasn’t the most confidence-inducing guy around, but he was decent and occasionally demonstrated a remarkable level of professional knowledge.

“I saw the numbers on your friend Ichinose. They were really incredible,” he said. “He blew the last Devicer out of the water in every respect. With him around, we may really get to see the full extent of the Mark III’s droid complement. The fifty thousand could be a reality.”

“I heard about that online! And on some action figure promo text and stuff!” Ijuin shouted excitedly. “They’re the Mark III’s own elite legion!”

“Something like that. But only assuming its adaptive nanofactors can be utilized to their fullest extent. Mizuki—the last Devicer Three—never managed to pull it off.”

“You’re saying the media lied to me?!”

Shiba gave a humorless laugh. “Blatantly. Advertising agencies had a whole lot more say in the Mark III’s marketing than truth or facts did. They cherry-picked what they needed to sell Devicer Three as a real-life Superman.”

“Now that you mention it, I remember them selling some special CD albums or something for fans.”

Every Japanese soccer enthusiast knew the artists behind them—the band had been on good terms with a few athletes who’d made it to the World Cup—and the lyrics were about as cheesy as could be. Complete with such obligatory phrases as: “be yourself,” and “never give up.”

“Right,” Shiba said with a tired smile. “Anyway, the other issue was that there weren’t nearly enough hands in the ground operator support team. Long story short, the fifty thousand was a pipe dream.”

“Ground operator?” Ijuin repeated.

“Think of it like this. The Mark III is the commander, ruler of the skies and the air droid division. But armies are made of more than commanders, right? Every general needs a tactician or lieutenant or two.”

Just when things were getting good, a pleasant pinging noise sounded and particles of light shimmered from the ring in Ijuin’s palm. The particles floated into the air, where they stopped and twinkled. Shiba gave him the okay with a nod, and Ijuin visualized the message opening. When he did, the particles projected a text window displaying a commlink from Aliya in a soft, rounded font.

“I’m heading into town. Want to come along?”

“Still at work,” Ijuin voiced his reply. “Aren’t you the speaker’s assistant? Where are you getting all this free time?”

His words appeared on the screen as text before being sent back to Aliya. Central Tower’s own proprietary messenger application allowed for direct and instant communication. Indeed, Aliya’s next message came a second later.

“Uncle’s busy playing with blocks, which according to him is a very important meditative exercise. So he gave me the rest of the day off.”

Ijuin looked at the attached image. “Where the hell’d he find a Mechagodzilla Lego set?”

Shiba smiled and grimaced at the same time. “Apparently before the Evacuation his room was filled with distractions like that. Some people make a living off of scavenging goods and rare items from the sunken city too.”

“Treasure hunting. Sounds fun!”

“Where is his niece living? In the tower?”

“Yeah, too dangerous for elves on the outer block. She’s not very happy about it, though.”

Ijuin had found work as the militia executive’s assistant, while Aliya tended to secretarial duties for her uncle.

“Then are you sure she should be going out there alone?” Shiba asked.

“Good point. Lady Ein and Ichinose are away right now, so I’ll shoot Natsuki a DM.”

The electric-powered scooter hummed across the seaside road at a brisk pace. It was a twenty-minute trip from Central Tower to the outer block, but it was time well spent to Aliya. She had replaced her characteristic beret with a helmet.

She shouted over the whipping wind and purring of the engine, “I am an animal, and I will have MEAT!”

Aliya didn’t have to make the commute every morning like Shiba and Ijuin did. She lived in Central Tower, which, after she’d become accustomed to the stringent rules and acquired her own room—away from the idiosyncrasies of her peculiar uncle—wasn’t all that bad. Still, though, she found herself making this trip at least once a day for a chance to unwind.

This was one such occasion.

“I wish they’d let me live here. I really don’t see what the big deal is.”

With the sun high in the sky and the salty wind at her cheeks, Aliya arrived at a business quarter on the outskirts of the settlement, parking her trusty scooter in one of the public parking lots. She would make the rest of the journey by foot. Her destination: the food market.

For a district whose architecture consisted mostly of shacks and prefabs, the streets were fairly lively. There was the energy of a prosperous boomtown in the air.

But it wasn’t always in a good way.

Aliya frowned. “The nerve of some people to line up for that nonsense in broad daylight,” she muttered to herself.

The general goods store she had just passed by was stocked with, well, general goods of all kinds, but Aliya had caught sight of something a little less ubiquitous on their shelves. Black DVD and Blu-ray cases, unmarked and unlabeled. It would have been impossible to tell their contents if the handmade sign next to them didn’t read “18+ ONLY.” Two more signs read, “MATURE ELVES” and “NOW ON SALE.”

A poster, plastered right outside for all to see, depicted a half-naked human woman with a doll face and an alluring body, along with the actress’s name. The work’s title, if the rest of the context clues weren’t enough, was clearly adult in nature. And true to the advertisement’s word, the actress wore fake ears to imitate the appearance of an elf. She even wore a fine, blonde wig.

Someone must have pirated an old adult film from before the Evacuation. Perhaps it had been burned from a video file, or perhaps the discs had been fished out from the underwater city. Either way, it spoke to one of two things: the tenacity of humanity’s capitalistic spirit or the nature of the male gender.

Aliya took no personal issue with the existence of such material, but did they really have to advertise it right in the middle of the street? In a city built and shared by genuine, actual elvish migrants? She herself was half elf, and a growing teenage girl. She could feel the gazes clinging to her, and it made her shudder.

Determined not to let it get to her, Aliya shook the anxiety off and kept walking. But just then, she heard a metallic clack. The distinct shutter sound of a camera.

She whipped around, spinning her head left and right. There were people everywhere. Men, women. Young, old. But no one carrying any cameras. The thought crossed Aliya's mind that she'd just been peeped on, but it was an uncomfortable one that she couldn't stand to entertain for longer than a moment. She returned to her own business.

Or she tried to, at least.

Suddenly, every male eye, every sideways glance directed at her felt prying. And the worst part was she knew she wasn't imagining things. One of the men at a nearby bar pointed right at her and started chatting with his friends.

"She's cute, eh?" he said.

"The fuck, dude. She's a kid," his drinking buddy snapped.

"Look at the ears, dipshit! That's an elf right there. I'mma hit on her."

"See if she's got any big sisters and let's get a mixer going!" another cheered.

"They've got different life spans than humans, yeah? Who knows how old that chick is! Y'all owe me drinks if I put a halfy in her!"

The men had obviously had one too many drinks, and Aliya was starting to panic. "I-I need to get to Natsuki's—"

Another camera shutter clacked nearby. Aliya could feel her heart beat out of her chest in fear. She was at her limit and tears threatened to stream down her face, when speak of the devil, she heard a familiar voice.

"Oh, jeez, I'm sorry!" the cheery voice said with frighteningly deceptive sincerity. "I was totes not even looking where I was going!"

There stood the ex-high schooler herself, Natsuki Hatano, standing out like a sore thumb in her peony furisode. She had bumped into a particularly pathetic-looking man of about thirty. Knocked flat on his butt, the scrawny man reached frantically for a digital camera that had fallen at Natsuki's feet, which she lazily picked up first.

"This is mine now," she said, smiling. "We good?"

The man glared at the katana on Natsuki's back, then quietly spat a choice and vulgar insult at her before scurrying away.

"H-How did he get it under my skirt…?" Aliya murmured.

They had cracked the password on the confiscated camera with nanomachines to verify the contents, just to be safe. Aliya somewhat regretted it.

“Gotta watch your back out here,” Natsuki said. “Word’s already getting around about the pretty half-elf who likes to take walks around the outer block.”

“Wh-Who, me?!”

“Yeah, you. Listen, I’m sure most people really appreciate what the elves do and act respectfully and all that, at least in public, but they *are* humans. And the elves are, well, they’ve got a lot ‘going on.’ Let’s just say our monkey brains are sorta wired for ‘humina humina,’ if you catch my drift.”

“Humina humina…”

“Humina humina. Sure, a fan club or two might be cute, but then there’s the ‘yikes’ stuff like the porn and cosplay. And then you’ve got the straight-up criminals, like stalkers or the people who sneak photos to sell in sketchy back alleys. A girl like you? A cute half-elf who takes the same trip here every day makes an easy target for freaks.”

“W-Well…!” Aliya stammered. “What about Ein?! She *lives* here!”

“Oh, I’m sure she has her fair share of creeps, and some of them are probably other women. But Ein’s shot Anomalies dead with the militia. Girl’s good with a gun, Aliya.”

The sages rarely left Central Tower, but Ein, knowing well the risks her heritage brought, had chosen to forgo a life of safety in favor of staying closer to Yu.

“No one’s got the balls to mess with her,” Natsuki went on languidly. “Except for that one time a drunk came up on her with a knife. You know those boots she wears? Imagine getting kicked in the face with them. ’Cause that poor guy sure didn’t need to. It was great.”

“That sounds like something a queen like her would do,” Aliya admitted.

They had made it to a food stand run by Natsuki and a few of her friends, including some of the Maizuru crew—that is, Yu and Ein. By day they ran the business, and by night they lived in co-op trailer houses. That had been their life for the last few weeks. What made the shop unique, though, were the ingredients.

“Here ya go, fresh off the grill.” Natsuki offered Aliya a skewer of roasted poultry.

“Finally!” she moaned. “I swear, the sauce you use is divine. I dream about it every night. Yu’s recipe, right?”

Aliya took the skewer impatiently. The meat was special. Not because it was chicken, and certainly not because it was gull, but because it was freshly hunted from far off the island. Today’s game was spot-billed duck.

Mallard was supposedly better for stewing, but those juicy spot-billed thighs marinated in their special, one-of-a-kind sauce and roasted over a smoky charcoal fire were positively to die for.

“I’m becoming more and more convinced that stealing Yu for myself would be a wise investment towards the perpetual fullness of my belly,” Aliya said. She nibbled off a bit of her duck. “If I’m desirable enough to get creeper shots of my underwear taken, then surely I could bag one boy.”

“I like your guts,” said Natsuki, “but good luck getting past Ein. She watches that guy like a hawk.”

“Are they out again today?”

“Yep. Keepin’ that dough flowin’. We have people lined up every afternoon, and we’re already one of the most popular joints around, all thanks to those two.” Natsuki grinned wide, then nonchalantly added, “Now as long as they can actually make it back again today, we’re golden.”

3

“Don’t need a ride back, do you? Same as always?”

“N-No. We’ll manage,” Yu replied to the big Russian man, Aleksei Volonov. Apparently, he had also come to the floating settlement as a refugee, and now he captained an official public transportation ship.

Boats were understandably vital to the survival of a city that had to sustain itself in the middle of the ocean, for a multitude of reasons. One being for collecting building materials from the sunken archipelago, another being for trade and mutual aid with other nearby countries that had just barely managed to keep their governments intact like Korea, China, and Taiwan. There was no end to the need for ships.

Yu looked over Volonov once more. His face was always locked in a stern grimace and his muscles were bulging. He looked like he belonged in the mafia or the military—the latter of which he did, Yu supposed. Aleksei was a member of the militia, and he had proven his skill with a gun and knife during Anomaly hunts.

He and Ein were like-minded, and she gave her stalwart friend a pleasant smile. “Visit us when we return. We must thank you for your constant assistance.”

“Goes both ways,” he rumbled. “I like keeping things simple.”

Volonov had rowed them out to a deserted island somewhere in Wakayama Bay. He pushed the dinghy from the sand and back into the ocean with ease and began the trip back to the transport ship, pushing and pulling the oars with fluid, practiced motions.

He’d done something involving international trade in the past, supposedly, which explained his fluency in the Japanese language. Yu and Ein watched him shrink into the horizon.

“Shall we begin?” Ein said.

“Guess we should. You remember your promise, right? I want to give it a try today.”

“Of course. I’ve been looking forward to it!”

Pop!

The dry crack of gunfire rang out. Ein used a simple hunting rifle in place of her usual Type 89. The untouched and uninhabited island was brimming with nature and the perfect spot for hunting, but before being cleared out and made into a tourist attraction, it had been used as a fort

during World War II. In more recent years, however, it served only as a home for wild animals.

Ein had just killed a rabbit, and it was Yu's job to collect the game. Its little body was still warm. But it was unmistakably dead. Its head had been blown clean off.

Ein never pulled the trigger heedlessly. The way she skulked through the greenery was purposeful, alert for any signs of life, and even when she spied them, her expression hardly changed. She simply raised her rifle and took aim. When she finally pulled the trigger, it was with confidence. And although that didn't mean she never missed, it was rare. Maybe only two out of every ten targets.

Rabbits, bulbuls, and doves alike met their end by that calm, calculated conviction. The two were making fast progress.

"We'll have plenty of options for the stand," Yu commented.

"I would like to try my hand at larger game, though." Ein looked aside and perked up. "Yu, look."

Between the trees and shrubs, he saw an adorable baby deer, its innocent eyes yet devoid of caution for the world around it. Yu and Ein could see it, so it could certainly see them, but it made no move to run.

Ein readied her rifle, and Yu got ready to stifle his sympathy.

Pop!

The fawn collapsed on the spot and the two of them walked up to where it fell. The bullet had passed near its heart, but it wasn't enough. It was still alive. Twitching and convulsing.

Ein looked down and said to Yu, "We need to put it out of its misery. Can you do it?"

"Y-Yeah," he stammered in reply. "Yeah."

Yu carried the same rifle as her. He raised it up, took aim at the fawn's head, and when he pulled the trigger, he did so with confidence.

The fawn stopped twitching.

They hunted four more adult deer after the fawn. Presently, Yu and Ein were bleeding and gutting the corpses of their quarries at a pristine creek. The work was a little painstaking, truth be told. One cut to the carotid artery with a disinfected knife, flush out the blood, slice the gut, then remove the entrails. This was usually Ein's job—she was more efficient, after all—but today, Yu wasn't a mere assistant.

"Four-legged beasts will spoil if they aren't handled properly and quickly," Ein lectured. "The taste will suffer as well. You'd best stick to birds or those with torso wounds for now."

"Got it," Yu replied nervously.

Today, he was bloodying his hands. Ein observed from behind, offering advice and occasionally demonstrating more appropriate techniques. She was a good teacher.

Yu had never taken much of an active role on their hunting trips, until this one. He had specifically asked Ein to teach him more about the process during this excursion, how to butcher and slaughter. He wanted to feel the weight of the flesh, of the life they were taking.

"Impressive as always," Ein said. "You have dexterous hands. You're already improving."

"It's not all that complicated." Yu cracked a self-deprecating smile. He didn't feel like he'd ever get used to Ein's endless praise.

Soon, he found a rhythm. Yu always was quick to pick up on things, and this was no exception. He absentmindedly looked up and met eyes with the fawn he'd killed, its round, faultless orbs staring back at him. It reminded him of the corpses. The piles of gored, massacred Anomalies. Many of them weren't monstrous abominations. Many were trolls, goblins—intelligent fae races. Humanlike.

But none, of course, were as human as the greatest enemy of all: the archmages.

"How do you fight something that can talk to you?" Yu muttered. "That can feel?"

The fawn gave no answer. Any that could be gleaned was only a reflection of pity in its emotionless eyes.

Yu hadn't realized just how deeply his meeting with the two archmages had affected him. It weighed heavily on his mind. But he would have to fight them nonetheless if he wanted to protect those dear to him.

He continued to work, his grip on the knife still firm. And Ein continued to watch him, nodding once in quiet conviction.

Few people in Nayuta didn't own guns, and Ein certainly wasn't the only experienced hunter in the city. What most residents *did* lack, however, were the means to make productive use of these tools.

There was more to hunting than simply shooting an animal dead. One needed a ship to transport the carcass, of which there would need to be many in order to justify the trip to begin with, which then meant that not just any boat would do. You needed a big one. This, in turn, demanded fuel, personnel, money to compensate said personnel, and the costs only continued to compound from there. One could potentially butcher the animal on-site and ship it in a more compact form, but then that would require a decently large refrigerator in order to keep the meat from spoiling.

In summary, going hunting was a costly affair for Nayuta's people. Consequently, meat was extremely valuable. Yu, however, had a trick up his sleeve.

"That's the fourth time," he moaned. "Still nothing. I don't know what's been going on lately."

"Take your time, Yu," Ein comforted him. "It's different without the presence of enemies, I'm sure. Try it again."

“Okay. Yeah.” He focused once more. “There! I armorized!”

A cloud of adaptive nanofactors glowed all around him before finally plating themselves over his body, enshrouding him in the black and gold nano-armor. It had taken Yu the better part of five minutes.

He nodded at Ein through the helmet. “The usual.”

“Understood.”

A window popped into his visor and a string of text scrolled across it.

```
[Mantra Server Startup Complete. All PRAJNA running.]
[System Now Booting Spellbook “VAJRA-SEKHARA SUTRA”...]
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Once Ein finished reciting the Gospel Code, two kinds of auxiliary droids materialized. The first was a large box resembling a big, metal storage container. The second was the MUV Airmobile—the jet ski-esque device he had used with the Mark III’s Full-Armor form.

Yu faced the giant container—that is, the heavy-duty transport droid, MUV Storebox—and configured it for cold storage. He began hauling the fruits of their labor into the oversized freezer one by one, the corpses as-of-yet unbutchered and normally very heavy. Lugging around a few rabbits, birds, or even the almost half-dozen deer they had shot was easy work for Devicer Three though.

And with that, their part of the job was done. All that was left was to carve it all up and turn it into food.

“Let’s set the timer for…twelve hours, just to be safe,” Yu murmured. “Mark III, map… Perfect. Send it to the settlement.”

The Mark III quickly charged both droids with enough energy to last for the allotted uptime. After activating the onboard intelligence for autonomous behavior, the MUV Storebox took off into the sky. This was the day that refrigerators flew—at seventy kilometers per hour, to be precise. It would arrive at its destination in a little over an hour. Mundane as it was, there could be no downplaying the sheer science and technology that went into allowing such a device to exist.

Yu let out a sigh as he de-armorized. “It feels a little wrong to be using the Asura Frame like this.”

“But it’s because you do that so many can enjoy affordable luxuries,” Ein said. “You use it for others, rather than for personal gain, and personally I see no harm in that.”

The food stand Natsuki and her friends had started had made a name for itself, rising above its business rivals fairly swiftly with their roasted skewers and improvised udon. The staff, Yu included, were rather young, the oldest being in their twenties, and no one was by any means an experienced chef, but their popularity grew nonetheless. The reasons were twofold and simple: it was cheap, and it was made with real meat. Not every day, granted, but the prospect alone was enough to launch their joint to public acclaim.

There was just one bottleneck: Yu and his situation with the Mark III.

“We’ve been fine so far, since the portal-keeps and Anomalies have been quiet, but that won’t last forever,” Yu murmured. “If I can’t fix things soon, I might not be able to protect everyone.”

He swallowed after that last word. Fix what? What obligation was he under to do anything? He *wasn’t* Devicer Three. He was just a middle schooler. A middle schooler who had managed to fluke his way into activating the Mark III. A stand-in. Why *shouldn’t* he use this opportunity to step down?

Because if he did, he wouldn’t be able to protect them. His friends. The people who gave him the strength to go out hunting on days like this. The courage to stare death in the face and fight the Anomalies and archmages in the first place.

He thought of them. Ein. Ijuin. Aliya. Even Natsuki had become someone he cared about. And the elves. And the ex-soldier Shiba. Volonov, the scary mafia man. Those were the faces that came to mind when Yu thought about the people he wanted to protect. But what about everyone else?

Yu could only come to the conclusion that he was a very close-minded and pigheaded person.

“I have an idea,” Ein said suddenly. “Care to indulge me?”

“This is even more fun than I thought!” Ein shouted, roaring with laughter.

“C-Can we have fun a little slower, please?!” Yu pleaded.

“*Slower*? Yu, the Asura reaches speeds thousands of times greater than this! This is nothing!”

Yu screamed at the top of his lungs. It was so much different when he could feel the wind whipping against his face and hear his ears pop.

He and Ein zipped across the ocean surface aboard the MUV Airmobile, slicing through waves and soaring through the air with the help of the anti-gravity lifters. The device came with a very convenient autopilot mode, but Ein didn’t much care for that function right now. She steered the vehicle herself, gliding it just above the water like a jet ski. Yu, on the other hand, sat behind her with his arms firmly locked around her waist and trying desperately not to fall off.

Ein’s laugh cut through the whirling wind. “I saw someone using a similar vehicle at the harbor and I simply had to try it for myself!”

“I didn’t know you could drive a jet ski!”

“I can’t! I thought it might not be too different from riding a horse, but this is far more exhilarating! I quite like it!”

“Wait, what?! What do you mean you *can’t*?!”

“Relax!” she shouted back. “I think I’ve got the hang of it! I might be a natural at this, Yu!”

“I don’t know about—Whoa!” Yu tightened his grip as they collided head first with a particularly large wave.

Ein was apparently intent on relishing this bit of seaside leisure—as evidenced by the fact that she had brought a change of clothes specifically for the occasion. She had changed into a navy blue, waterproof rash guard, with flower-patterned swim trunks over a pair of leggings and a sun visor on her head. And she absolutely killed the look, the skintight clothing accentuating her figure all the more.

"Forget about the world for a moment," she said. Yu's heart skipped a beat. Her voice was bright and pleasant. Clear. Clear enough to shine through the gloom. "Empty your mind and enjoy yourself, so that you're better prepared for tomorrow's troubles. You're not going to let me have all the fun, are you?"

"I mean, don't get me wrong!" Yu shouted. "I like roller coasters, but this is ridiculous!"

The screaming continued for some time as they strode along the ocean. Eventually, when he was calm enough for it, Yu took the helm for a while, and they went on taking turns until at last they neared the shore of Nayuta.

The sun was deep in the western sky. Dusk would fall soon. They had played the entire afternoon away, and now Ein guided them towards the city steadily and calmly, which Yu greatly appreciated. But then, before they'd reached the shore, the droid suddenly slowed to a stop. The anti-gravity lifters kept them afloat, even without forward motion.

Ein remained facing forward. "Yu. No matter what decision you ultimately reach, I will support it," she said softly. "So I want you to keep looking inward. To take as long as you need to find your answer."

Yu was silent for a long moment. Finally, he simply replied, "Yeah."

He couldn't see her face, but he knew it must have been as beautiful, proud, and dignified as it always was. He admired that about her. His mind was so fragile, so easily clouded with worry, but she had a way of making his world feel brighter.

The clone of a great elvish warrior queen. It was an incredible title to hold, and Yu didn't understand what could have possibly made *him* worthy of standing beside such an amazing woman. Maybe he wasn't yet. Maybe he was meant to try. Maybe, one day, he *would* be worthy…

"W-Wait, uh, Ein? When did you turn around?"

"I was wondering where your mind had gone," she said. Ein was supposed to have her hands on the controls, but at some unknown point in time she had spun around and was now staring Yu right in the face.

He could see her every feature. Every unique, irreplicable detail. Her sharp, almond-shaped eyes gazed deep into his own. He could feel her breath against his nose.

"L-Little close there," he stammered.

"Of course I am," Ein replied coolly.

"You're doing it on purpose?!"

"Really, Yu? We've shared one kiss already. I should think my intentions are obvious."

“I don’t know about all that.”

“You’re normally so perceptive. Need I really spell it out? This is the part where you’re supposed to fall madly in love with me and steal my lips.”

She fluttered her eyelashes alluringly and slightly parted her lips.

“Listen, I-I really think this isn’t the right time yet!” Yu stammered.

“‘Yet’…” Ein echoed pensively. “Very well, I suppose I’ll take what promises I can get. I will say, however, that I would like to see a little more assertiveness on your part.”

“I’m a middle schooler! I don’t even know how I’d do that!”

“It’s not so hard. You could take me in an impassioned embrace, for example.”

“I really hope you’re talking about a hug,” Yu groaned.

“A hug… An expression of love through the mutual caressing of one another. I know of this concept. Yes, this will work! Let us engage in a hug, my fated one!”

Ein’s seductively languid expression instantly transformed into a giddy smile, her arms stretched out wide for optimal hugging conditions. Yu was at a loss. His pensive mind didn’t know how to handle such levels of positivity, but there wasn’t much of a choice anymore. Yu was going to have to hug that girl.

The pivotal moment was at hand when gunshots filled the air. Several at once. The rapid pop of machine guns, the punctuated cracks of rifles.

“Ein! Yu!” Aliya’s voice echoed through the commlink. “Thank goodness you’re back! It’s Anomalies!”

4

Due to its location far off the coast, floating in the Wakayama Bay between Shikoku and the Kii Peninsula, Nayuta was relatively safe from Anomaly attacks. Or at least, it had been until two or so months ago.

Airborne and aquatic Anomalies were becoming more prevalent. The city had been discovered. And the masters of the portal-keeps, the archmages that Yu himself had faced, had set their sights on it—the Chosen Dharva, Scullchance of the Pride and Quldald of the Whirlwind.

Half-fish, half-man merfolk had invaded—anthropomorphic creatures coated in scales, with gill-like slits along their neck and fins jutting out from their limbs. Nearly two hundred of them were encroaching on Nayuta, wielding vicious-looking tridents, and they leaped gracefully from the ocean depths along the perimeter of the harbor. The unfortunate dock workers were the first fatalities. The merfolk skewered their soft flesh like shish kebabs, but the humans were swift and fierce in their response.

Militia volunteers rushed to the scene. There weren’t enough hands around Nayuta for the city to maintain a standing army, so in times of emergency, every resident in possession of a weapon was called to action. Participation would be compensated. The only permanent military officials

on the island were executives like Shiba, and the settlement owed much of its long-standing safety to its brave conscripts.

Now it was their job to protect the city once more. A seemingly simple task against the merfolk, given their lack of firearms--but it wasn't that simple after all. The scales lining the enemy's body were tough as iron, possibly tougher. Standard firepower couldn't put a dent in them.

"Guns don't work!"

Exceptionally strong weapons, like high caliber rifles or shotguns, however, proved effective. Machine guns showed some manner of success as well, mostly in that there were more bullets to potentially hit an eye or gap in the scales. But anyone unlucky enough to have been equipped with a sidearm—or, heavens forbid, a bladed weapon—met with a gruesome death at the ends of the enemy's three-pronged spears. Those even more unlucky were torn to shreds by their jagged, razor-sharp teeth.

Before long, the chaos was underscored by the low wailing of the settlement's emergency siren.

Elsewhere in the harbor was the moored Naval Defense warship.

"Anomalies in the city!"

"Move, move, move! Rescue civilians! Hustle!"

The Izumo-class destroyer's days of seafaring were over, but that didn't stop what was left of the Defense, about one hundred twenty people all told, from making use of the convenient living space. Nothing was necessarily stopping them from living ashore, where there was functional, albeit limited, electricity and running water. Yet they chose to remain on the ship, purely out of distrust for the elves and their artificial city.

"Bet those elf assholes called 'em here!" one sailor spat.

"The hell're they doing up in that tower? Can't trust a thing those sneaky bastards do until they come clean and let the real leaders take charge."

"They've even got the old Diet members in their pocket."

"And our old superior officers. Scratch that, *former* superior officers."

"Would you all zip it?" a tall young man interrupted. "Go and protect those civilians!"

Captain Shiro Sakuma was both the oldest and highest-ranking member aboard the warship. Partly because few commissioned officers had made it to Nayuta, partly because anyone old enough to outrank him was too infirm and simply wanted to live in peace. And it wasn't long before the elves had them wrapped around their fingers.

So the younger officers denounced the cowards, defected to the decommissioned Izumo destroyer, and began to plot their takeover of the settlement. Against their superiors' orders. Naval, Ground, Air—branch divisions stopped mattering underneath their shared goal. A goal that Sakuma championed as their leader. At his command, the group hurried off the ship and rushed to the people's aid.

Meanwhile, Yu looked at Ein in panic.

"What do I do?!" he shouted. "I can't armorize!"

“Stay calm, Yu! No hero can stand on every battlefield. Help me aid our allies from a distance!”

“R-Right!”

“Take the controls and I’ll attack!”

The MUV Airmobile glided towards the harbor with Yu in the driver’s seat. Ein aimed her rifle from behind him and pulled the trigger once. Twice. Each time, one of the merfolk fell, punched between the eyes, beneath the arms, along the seams between scales around the waist—anywhere Ein could find a kink in their natural armor. Yu stabilized the Airmobile along the water, giving her as clear a shot as possible.

“Sorry, guys. Me and Shiba tried to get the droids up, but by the time we did the fight was already over.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, Ijuin.”

Yu listened to Ijuin and Aliya’s conversation via commlink, but his mind was elsewhere. He stood alone at the harbor.

“The surveillance droids all have eyes on the air,” Aliya said. “It was just bad luck that they came from under the ocean.”

“We’ll have to start keeping watch down there now too,” said Ijuin.

“I’ll look into seeing if we have any droids that work underwater.”

The fight had ended about half an hour ago, and the docks were still ringing with the post-battle silence. Some of the militia volunteers were celebrating their survival with a few cigarettes—precious commodities that weren’t consumed lightly. Others grieved for lost friends. Ein was going around offering comfort and words of consolation to them. Shiba, too, was busy scurrying around on executive duty. Paying the volunteers, compensating the families of the dead, and organizing the paperwork was part of his job.

And for those lost, there were just as many wounded, bleeding from holes bored by the merfolk’s tridents. Those with injuries too deep to treat themselves were transported to Central Tower by relief vehicles, and those who didn’t have that kind of time were being surrounded by expedient EMS teams composed of elves from the tower’s emergency room.

Despite being in a state of crisis, their beauty and skill was captivating. Even to their barely conscious patients. Their harried yet precise techniques captivated the audience as if they were putting on a thoroughly practiced performance.

Not everyone was amused, however.

“Get off of me! I don’t want…your help!” a man in a military uniform groaned. Despite the blood gushing from the gash in his flank and the dark circles of death forming beneath his eyes, he was somehow still awake. And he refused to let the elves near him. “If Three had been here… If Devicer Three had been here, this’d never have happened! He’d have saved us! Just like he did before! Stop hiding him, damn you!”

“At ease, sergeant,” a tall and attractive young man interjected. He addressed the elves. “We’ll treat our own.”

Yu recognized him. It was Sakuma, the captain who had barged into the MRI room, and the goalie he had played soccer with. A group of people who looked to be his subordinates gathered around the critically wounded man and placed him on a stretcher, heedless of the elvish doctors’ warnings.

The people within earshot of the scuffle suddenly started to whisper with uncertain expressions.

“Hey, yeah, I thought Devicer Three was back. Where is he?”

“The elves are hiding him? How would they even do that? The Asura Frame’s the strongest weapon in the world.”

“I mean, the elves *did* make it. It’s not that far-fetched.”

“But how do we even know the rumors that he’s back aren’t a load of bull?”

“You calling me a liar?! I seen him with my own eyes! Saved my life, he did!”

The relief and triumph of a battle won had all at once become shrouded by doubt. Shouting matches started to break out over what was true and what was mere gossip, and some were getting heated.

“You know what? It doesn’t even matter if he’s back or not!” someone screamed, making Yu jump. He looked around for the source of the shout. “The cold, hard truth is Three left his nation and countrymen to die when they needed him most! I hope to god he *is* back, ’cause if I see him…”

The man took a swig of some clear liquid from an unlabeled bottle in his hand. Yu could smell the alcohol from where he stood. It couldn’t have been anything commercially sold, so it had to be home-brewed. And poorly, at that. Clearly he’d wasted no time indulging himself once the battle was over. He was plopped lazily onto the ground, his Type 89 thrown haphazardly to his side—Defense Force standard-issue.

Upon closer inspection, Yu could just barely make out a camouflage pattern beneath the dirt and grime on his clothes. He was ex-military.

“You’ve got some balls to talk like that, old man,” someone growled.

“And what’ve you done, huh?! He saved lives!”

“And look where that’s gotten us.” The veteran scoffed. The crowd stepped closer. “H-Hey now, back up. Listen, I get it, I crossed the line.”

A mob of fans, frantic with worry for their hero, formed around the disdainful old man, and they started to assault him. Fists were thrown and feet were brought down wildly. Bystanders tried to break up the violence as best they could.

It was his fault. Yu dragged his feet into motion and started to leave. His heart felt like it would burst at any moment.

“Looks like you’re pretty popular.”

Yu turned around and saw Natsuki. She was smiling. As carefree today as she was the day before and every day before that. But Yu wasn’t in the mood to smile just then. He wanted to be alone.

He turned his back to her once more. “Sorry, I’m not…feeling too well.”

He took a single step forward, when he felt a hand clamp down on his shoulder. Natsuki had sneaked up on him without a sound.

“Sorry to hear that,” she said. “Why don’t you come back to my place with me?”

“But—”

“But nothin’! What, am I not good enough for you?” Natsuki locked her arm with Yu’s and pressed her body against his, turning him around the opposite direction and dragging him along. “I could pick you up like a princess if you want. You did say you weren’t feeling good.”

“I-I’ll manage.”

“I’ll take that as consent. You and me are going on a date.”

“How is this a date?!” Yu exclaimed.

“Look at us, dude.” She smirked mischievously. “Ein’d kill me if she saw this.”

It dawned on Yu that she had a point. Walking arm-in-arm the way they were was just asking for misunderstandings. He tried to wiggle free, but he might as well have been trying to bend iron. Natsuki wasn’t going anywhere.

She winked at him in her usual charismatic way. “Gimme a chance and hear an old pal out, won’tcha?”

Yu finally realized that this wasn’t about her. It was about him. Although her appearance certainly made her the center of attention, Natsuki was not a self-centered person. She was worried for her young friend and wanted to be there for him.

He stopped resisting. He wasn’t sure how to thank her for her compassion, but he was glad she was there, and his eyes started to burn with emotion.

5

It warranted no mention that Natsuki Hatano the kabukimono samurai girl and her katana-shaped monomolecular sword were an indomitable force on the day’s battleground. Dozens of merfolk were now nothing but rust upon her blade. Presently, though, there were no more fish people in need of slaying, so she had returned home with Yu.

It was twilight. The only light that remained was the last of the evening, and the setting sun’s reddish hue tinted the neighborhood trailer houses a dark orange. The provisional housing area had originally been planned for use as an emergency refuge, hence the mobility of the shelters that occupied it. Technically that was still what it was, just without the “provisional” and “emergency” aspects.

Two residences had been allocated to Yu and his friends. He and Ijuin shared one together, much to Ein’s annoyance, while she ultimately, and reluctantly, ended up rooming with Natsuki and several of her female acquaintances.

“Looks like we’re the first ones back,” Natsuki commented.

“It *is* the busiest time of day for the food stand,” said Yu. “We should be there helping them.”

It was right about dinner time, and bellies would be calling for food before the power went out at 2100. Natsuki, however, showed no inclination to get back up now that she had already sat down and thrown off her peony furisode—her “coat,” for all intents and purposes. The living room carpet was comfortable on her bare, leisurely crossed legs, the former quality standing out most uncomfortably to the young middle schooler.

Natsuki seemed to either not notice or, more likely, not care for his discomfort. “Eh, I already did work today. And you’ve been out hunting all day. Figured you’d be beat.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Then boy, do I have a proposition for you—you and me…doing absolutely nothing! All work and no play makes Yu a dull boy, y’know?”

The cramped trailer house offered little room for furniture, not even enough for a table and chairs. So Yu plopped down on the carpet like Natsuki. And it was only then that he realized that he’d never had the chance to be alone with her before.

“Think I’ll pull out something special for today,” she said. She reached over to a box by the wall—pretty much the only thing that could amount to her own private storage, given the circumstances—and rummaged through it, eventually pulling out a coffee mill and a jar of beans. Both rather rare sights in Nayuta.

“Oh, I’ll grind them for you,” Yu offered.

“Nuh-uh, you cook everything. I’ve got this one,” Natsuki insisted.

“If you say so.”

“Don’t get me wrong, though, I’d have no shame if this were anything even remotely more complicated.”

Natsuki put a kettle on, and while waiting for the water to boil, she ground a few handfuls of beans in the mill. The smell quickly became hard to resist. When the water started to boil, she replaced the paper filter on the coffee dripper, filled it with the powdered beans, and slowly poured the water through.

“Here.” Natsuki handed Yu a mug of the steaming black beverage.

He took a sip. “I don’t know what it is about someone brewing coffee for you that makes it taste…better. Maybe it’s just me.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s just you. I could always make it for myself, but I’m like, what’s the point? Feels a little empty. Bein’ alone.” She lifted her own mug to her lips.

Yu dared not take this rare opportunity for granted, and he savored every sip. After a long while, he set his empty cup on a tray on the carpet. Natsuki had long finished hers. Her taste for the drink was more than a little evident.

“So…” Yu fiddled with a question that had been on his mind for a while. “Where were you augmented, Natsuki?”

Their ages weren’t so far apart, really. They weren’t so different. She would have been studying for college entrance exams in any other time. Like any other seventeen-year-old.

“Same place as you guys, probably,” she said. “Went to school in Kyoto. They determined my nano-fitness during physicals. Without actually telling us they were probing for it, of course.”

“I remember hearing there was another nano-tech facility in the west.”

“Yup. Everyone with a high-enough number got rounded up and augmented. And then crazy things started happening to my body. Lucky me, right?”

Natsuki’s nanomachines manifested primarily in her physical abilities. In her strength, durability, eyesight, hearing… The effects of her augmentations were conspicuous and easily the most extensive out of everyone Yu knew. Natsuki was extraordinary, even without the Asura Frame.

“My dad was a stuntman, fun fact,” she said. “When he retired, he got into choreography, stage fighting, that sorta thing. He used to teach me kendo and how to box when I was a kid.”

“Wow,” said Yu. “Sounds like a cool dad.”

“So I was, y’know, always the tough girl. But the nanomachines made me into a straight-up action hero. And that’s how I felt. Like a superhero. All I needed was a shield to throw or a web to sling!”

Yu snorted. Her jokes reminded him of the way Ein would always cheer him up, but in a completely different way.

Natsuki’s shoulders dropped. “And then the Evacuation happened, and I think that sorta speaks for itself. Without any leaders, police, or military, it was up to me to protect my friends and family. From Anomalies. From people… No matter what.”

“You fought people?”

“Yup. It wasn’t very fun, I’ll tell ya that much!”

Yu hadn’t expected a straight answer. But it made sense. Not everyone had taken shelter with the Defense Force like he had. They had met Natsuki in a dissolute, lawless refugee town. There had been no elves, no local government, no militia, and certainly no surveillance droids.

Natsuki had said it well enough herself at the time.

“It was like, three whole seasons worth of drama.”

“Gave a few bad guys what for, maybe gave a few badder guys a little more.”

Humans were at least good at one thing—constantly fighting with each other.

Her carefree smile returned. “I’ve done a lot of thinking about who I was back then. Ultimately, I decided it was time for a bit of a class change. And so I evolved from ‘high school girl’ to ‘defender of the people’!”

The people. There it was again. The very thing plaguing Yu's mind.

He straightened his back and looked Natsuki in the eye. "What does 'defender' mean to you?" he asked.

"I'm strong," she replied. "So I protect people who aren't. Everyone. And my pay for a job well done is just a simple 'thank you.'" Natsuki thought for a moment before correcting herself. "Not that I'll turn a donation down or anything! But what I mean is that's not what I do it for."

"I..." Yu's voice was hoarse. "I don't know if I can be that kind of person. There are so many people in the world, and they say bad things, and they hurt my friends. It's just, I don't know if I can bring myself to risk my life for them."

Last June, Kanto became the bottom of the ocean. The heart of Tokyo was lost, the government in shambles, and ever since, Yu had only been betrayed by the adults in his life.

Like the military. They abandoned the people and left them to die while demanding respect and authority, all the while abusing them in Maizuru.

Like the barbarians who would have rather bickered and pointed their guns at each other than the Anomalies.

Like the racists who rejected any incongruence with their own little bubbles. Who treated Ein, Aliya, and all the other elves with blatant disrespect. Who were too blind to see the potential for friendship and family, simply because of a petty difference in race.

"I don't think I'm cut out to be a hero," Yu confessed. "I can't say the things the last Devicer Three could. I can't pretend to fight for 'my people and country' like he always talked about in the interviews."

"Hey, that makes two of us."

"And I just... I don't like killing. Even someone who's supposed to be my enemy," he said. "So I think, if I really do plan on being Number Three, then I need to be something else. Something other than some random middle schooler. I need to become something more than I am."

Yu and Ein had once talked about masked heroes before. She had told him something then that he hadn't quite understood. That she was witnessing the birth of something incredible. But Yu didn't know if he could meet those expectations—to become something greater than she could possibly imagine.

Yu noticed the prolonged silence. "Is everything all right, Natsuki?"

"Yeah, uh. Just thinking a little," she laughed. "You know, I think you're onto something. Yeah, all that cliché 'I'll fight for myself, my way' crap's old news these days! I really like the way you think!"

Here Yu was, opening up about his struggles, and his confidant was smiling? And it wasn't a comforting smile either. It was the exact same grin Natsuki had on her face at pretty much any given moment, but there was something more to it. It was an expression of willful defiance against these dark times. An invitation to be one of the few who smiled in the face of adversity.

And a statement of respect for the man called Yu Ichinose.

“I might be starting to get what Ein sees in you,” Natsuki said.

“What do you mean?” Yu asked with a puzzled expression.

“Oh, stop. Loosen up a little, we’re friends now! Use that big brain your girlfriend likes to brag about all the time, will ya? C’mere!”

Natsuki yanked Yu directly into her bosom.

“Owowow! That hurts! Also, y-your chest!”

“What about it? Hush and let your big sis rub that smart head o’ yours! Lemme mess up that hair, you rascal!”

Perhaps noogies were simply Natsuki’s love language, but Yu was finding it hard to appreciate with his face pressed against her less than subtle bust, and her meager tank top and hot pants did very little to suppress the soft sensation of her skin.

Despite the obstacles, however, Yu managed to collect his thoughts.

“Do you think I’ll ever be like you?” he asked.

“Sure you will!” she replied cheerfully. “It’s easy, really. All you’ve gotta do is try your best to help people, when you can, where you can. That’s it! Heck, with that Frame you’ve got, you might even make a better hero than you think!”

Her answer was swift and final. Very much hero-like in and of itself.

Yu would never be even half as heroic. He knew that. But oddly enough, he was okay with it.

Five days later, two things would occur to test the limits of Yu’s conviction.

The first was a commlink that said the elves had been taken hostage. And Aliya was with them.

The second was an amber aurora billowing in the sky.

Chapter 4: The King’s Return

1

It was cloudy that late April afternoon. Aliya Todo was at work, either aiding or babysitting her eccentric uncle, depending on your perspective. Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, this was an easy task when the speaker was busy fiddling with his toys. In truth, he wasn’t lying when he said he did it to meditate; when his fingers were preoccupied, you could be certain that his brain was at work.

The problem, then, was when his fingers *weren’t* preoccupied. In such cases, Nadal’s silent scheming manifested itself much more vocally, in the form of snark, sarcasm, and every other technique in his arsenal of being a public nuisance. Should there be no one within earshot of his ramblings, he would go out of his way to rectify that by ensnaring some poor soul, regardless of the importance of whatever their task at the time might have been.

Thus, Aliya’s mission was simple: keep her uncle on a leash. And for the times when he didn’t know when to shut up, she had a secret weapon.

“Indeed, compared to we elves, you humans *are* rather simple, neurologically speaking, and your people have the emotional intelligence of wild animals,” Nadal ranted. “Rest assured, however, that I say that with no prejudiced intent. I’m actually something of a zoology buff... Just a bit of black humor for you.” There was silence. “You were supposed to laugh. Why are you smiling like that? Are you patronizing me?”

“Don’t make me call Ein,” Aliya said.

That secret weapon never failed. Reluctantly, Nadal finally stopped accosting the innocent cleaning staff. The Replicant girl evidently held great sway over the fastidious speaker.

Aliya giggled with cruel satisfaction. “I’m very glad that little birdie told me how often you got raked over the coals when you were the queen’s counselor.”

Nadal’s hard expression looked a little paler than usual. “We have no business bothering Her Highness with these trivial matters.”

“I dunno,” she said menacingly, “Ein told me to let her know whenever you got on my nerves. She seemed pretty serious to me.”

Nadal went quiet. Pleased with her victory in their battle of words, Aliya turned back around and regarded the items on display closely. Several incredibly valuable-looking objects were locked inside glass cases, like what one might find at a museum. The place had a long name, so most elves simply referred to it as the Treasury, but Aliya remembered it was actually called the Other World Archive for Culturally Significant Artifacts.

There was an ominous pot, a staff, a cape, a mysteriously glowing black agate, a bracelet engraved with magic runes, an aged scroll, a stone pagoda carved with a long inscription, the skull of what looked to be some kind of

mammal… Numerous items of unknown origin were set out, and supposedly they had all been brought over from Param by the migrant elves.

“Nothing here really strikes me as ‘treasure,’” Aliya admitted. “But they make my head feel…tingly. Maybe it’s the nanomachines.”

She looked down at the ring of light glowing from her right palm. It had been active ever since they first set foot in the Treasury.

Nadal shot his niece an aloof and sidelong glance, then puffed his chest. “As suspected,” he said. “These former magic items all lost their powers when they were brought to Earth, but the spiritual energies they’ve imbibed over the ages are not so easily diminished.”

“What’s ‘as suspected’?” Aliya asked.

“Oh, just a theory I had. Your nano-abilities are manifested in your perception, and you can already detect magic, so I thought I’d give them a little extra nudge. See if you would react to the energy of the items here.”

“I don’t remember signing any consent form for this experiment!”

“Try to understand. These times are dire, and you and your friends’ abilities very well may be our last hope. I brought you here to that end.”

“You know I’m your niece, not a tool, right?” Aliya huffed. Shame on her for expecting anything different out of her uncle. “And here I thought you were spending all this time with me because you managed to find some semblance of familial love in that thick head of yours!”

“I’m simply being logical. Wait, you’re seeing Her Highness later. Redact that statement.” Nadal forced his face into a different expression. “Oh, but I do love you, my dear niece!” he said unconvincingly. “There. Tell her that’s what I said. She should like that.”

“Oh, sure, I’ll tell her that. Along with everything else!” Aliya stomped away from her uncle and his oh-so-genuine affection, though not out of any real anger. She had made peace with the man he was a long time ago. Something had caught her eye.

She approached an elongated display case, inside of which lay a weapon. At the end of its long shaft was a vicious blade that was curved like a katana and far too big to fit a normal naginata.

“This looks like something straight out of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*,” Aliya murmured. The point where the hilt and blade connected had been crafted into the shape of a dragon, with the blade extending from its open mouth. A name popped into her head—Green Dragon Crescent Blade.

On the opposite end, at the ferrule where the shaft would meet the ground, there was an oddly shaped bit of construction.

“A wheel? Why would there be a…”

Aliya stared at the Green Dragon, at the implement at the bottom of its shaft. Suddenly, her head started to tingle.

“We should get back to the office, Aliya.”

“Oh,” she said. “Right.”

She followed behind Nadal, but she couldn’t shake that uncanny feeling. It was like the answer was right there on the fringes of her mind. Aliya realized that she could have solved the problem by simply asking for Nadal’s help—for all his quirks, he was quite knowledgeable—but she’d also just as soon have flung herself off the floor of Central Tower they were on. That being the ninth.

Just like a regular museum, the floor opened up to a reception desk, with the elevator and stairs just a short walk away. But Nadal headed for neither.

“See? I told you,” he said, stopping suddenly. “I was right to bring you here.”

The entrance was blocked by a squad of men holding guns, and they were aimed at Nadal. They wore blue and green camouflage, Defense Force uniforms. Their timing couldn’t have been worse.

Outside the window, Aliya saw an amber curtain covering the sky. A portal-keep had materialized. The crystal palace had become visible from the city only recently, and now it was finally here.

Aliya pointed outside. “L-Look! Can’t you see that?!” she shouted. “They’re here! And it’s going to be more than just a skirmish!”

“Then it’s a good thing we got here in time,” a young officer replied coldly. “Once we rescue Devicer Three from you people, they won’t be a problem.”

The man was tall and lean, and his black hair was buzzed short like a proper sportsman. A captain’s badge adorned the collar of his uniform.

“Other-worlders, we are officially taking control. Once you’ve surrendered, we ask for your cooperation in maintaining basic infrastructure around the settlement, and we promise to treat you fairly. So long as you don’t try to call your friends for help.”

There were two groups in the observation lounge, but neither were enjoying the view from Central Tower’s top floor. One consisted of about twenty elves. Every speaker had been taken hostage, a task made easy by the fact that the sages were unarmed by tradition.

The other had the guns. A suicide squad of thirty-five, armed with Type 89s, some of which were trained on the elves who had been rounded up and sat down near one of the glass walls.

“Call who, might I ask?” a speaker said, unafraid of the weapon in his face. “What nation or military have we that comes to our aid?”

“You tell me,” the squad’s leader replied. “There are two portals in western Japan. One in Maizuru, one in the Great Kansai Bay, and *both* have been on the move around all of Kansai.” His eyes turned sharp like daggers. “Who’s to say they’re not getting a little inside information?”

“As if this bears repeating, but I’ll say it once more. Your claims are groundless,” Raghu El Lapan shot back calmly.

Even for an elf, he was astonishing. An aura of grace permeated his being that marked him among his peers, and it was only accentuated by his flowing, ash blond hair that extended all the way down to his waist. He was something of the council’s spokesperson, and it wasn’t hard to see why the folks in the outer block had nicknamed him “Prince Charming.”

He elegantly displayed his indignation with a brush of his hair behind his ear. An act so utterly sophisticated that such regality simply couldn’t have originated from this planet. It made Sakuma scowl.

Raghu regarded the ruffled captain for a moment. “Consider the following,” he said. “The phantom fortresses and the Chosen Dharva are just as much our enemy as yours, and they have killed our kind as they have your own. We are on the same side.”

“Then where the *hell* is Devicer Three?!” Sakuma screamed in a sudden burst of rage. “He’s here one moment, and then he’s gone. There’s only one explanation. You’re in league with the archmages, you’re keeping him prisoner, and you’re going to turn him over to the enemy!”

Sakuma was a fearless man, but not an angry man. He always spoke for the military with a level head, and his temper rarely flared, if ever. But he could only take so much. He could only spin his wheels for so many months, running around in an endless maze with no exit like a lab rat searching for cheese that doesn’t exist, before something became the final straw.

Aliya could imagine the stress he must have been under. He wasn’t like her uncle. He couldn’t twiddle his thumbs with a calculated smile while the world burned, like Nadal could. That just wasn’t human.

About half an hour had passed since they’d been taken hostage. The amber aurora was ever-present, and it was only a matter of time before they were attacked.

“Hey,” Aliya whispered to her uncle, “do you think someone fed them all that? About how you apparently plan to sell Devicer Three off to the archmages.”

“I do. An ex-Defense Force agent of mine,” he whispered back. “Well, *he* didn’t know he was an agent, to be fair. I just told him a few things that might have influenced him into spreading a little information to Sakuma and his comrades.”

“Why can’t you be as eloquent at normal conversation as you are at being a snake?!” Then again, it was his incessant plotting that had landed them in this situation, and the young half-elf wasn’t very comfortable with loaded guns being pointed at her. “Not that I’d call *this* eloquent. Do you see what you’ve gotten us into?!”

“Drastic times call for drastic measures,” Nadal murmured flatly.

“How does that correlate to this?!” Aliya demanded.

“Not even the great and mighty lion can fight when plagued by parasites. I simply thought it was time to be rid of ours.”

Aliya blinked in surprise. Nadal wasn't joking like he usually would. He was calm. Calculating. She had forgotten that he, as well as her mother, had come from a world of endemic war and strife. To Nadal, this was yet another battlefield.

Word was that the insurgents had first targeted the Prayer Wheel behind the tower, their source of electricity. Every functioning combat vehicle had charged through the central block's surveillance network straight for the Ferris wheel-esque generator, and while the security droids were deployed in defense, this had been a feint. The coup's real goal was the council, and the ensuing chaos had been the perfect smokescreen for the bulk of the force to invade the tower directly.

"B-But what if they kill us?" Aliya stammered quietly.

"They won't," Nadal replied assuredly. "We're sages. Each a genius in our own right, by Earth standards. They know how valuable we are, and that they need us to maintain the settlement's systems."

"Well, *I'm* not a sage!" Aliya decided she liked keeping her fate in her own hands, and that she wasn't going to sit around and do nothing. She remembered her uncle asking her to use her nanomachines earlier, specifically to send a commlink (which came very much in handy at times like this). She could contact her friends. "Ijuin! Natsuki!"

While Aliya was working stealthily to distract herself from the fear, Nadal glanced to the side in mild shock.

"Well," he murmured, "this was *not* as suspected. I had hoped he would make an appearance, but wasn't counting on it."

He followed High Priestess Azalin's gaze. As both an Asura Frame development lead and devout servant to the artificial gods of destruction, as well as a speaker on the council, she too had been taken hostage. This whole time she had been eyeing the barrel aimed at her with worry, but now, she was smiling, hope in her eyes as she stared up into the air. Her watch—the portable computer on her wrist—had booted up on its own, and it projected a three-dimensional hologram of none other than the Mark III, along with various data parameters.

And Rudra's power output was skyrocketing. Yu had armorized. Against all odds and despite a success rate of barely thirty percent, he had done it.

Azalin rejoiced at the awakening of their Asura of the sky, her smile pleasant and charming. "Well, *someone's* feeling better!"

2

Everyone in Nayuta was within commlink range of each other, making any augmented individual within the city capable of sending and receiving messages composed not of voice or text, but thoughts. Which meant that Aliya had no difficulty sending an SOS, even at gunpoint.

"It's Aliya! The military's taken us prisoner!"

She need do nothing else but make that single silent plea. Yu was at the harbor when he got the transmission, right about when the amber aurora

appeared. The militia was gathering at the shore and preparing to meet the enemy.

"What the hell are they *thinking*?!" Yu shouted, garnering himself the attention of the people nearby. Executive Officer Shiba, the burly Russian man Volonov, and Ein the Replicant Girl were with him. The latter had received the same message as Yu.

"So the young soldiers have begun a coup," she mused. "Due in no small part to Nadal's provocations, no doubt. Unfortunately, his scheming seems to have gone over their heads. It's a shame."

"Seriously!" Yu said. "I can't even imagine how the speakers must be feeling right now!"

Ein shook her head. "You misunderstand. True, I do worry for the sages, but I was referring to the youths."

"What?"

"Nadal has likely orchestrated this in order to...be rid of them."

"Yeah, the sages aren't really killers, but..." Shiba sighed. "Considering they specifically came here to escape a world of constant war, bloodshed's not exactly a new concept to them, and I doubt they'd hesitate to get their hands dirty for the greater good. If they don't sentence them to death outright, chances are they'll just end up imprisoned for life or banished to a deserted island."

"A coup gives them plenty of excuse," Volonov said with confidence. His homeland, Russia, was not unused to the other side's assaults, especially at Primorsky Krai where they took the brunt of the fighting. As a foreign refugee, he wasn't in a situation so different from the elves. "They can't do squat without just cause, not without upsetting the Japanese. They'd have riots. That's what this is about. Your elf leaders used themselves as bait to make the military boys give them a reason. Gutsy move."

While the fluent former businessman pulled the curtain back on the elves' plot, another commlink came to Yu and Ein.

"Hey, um, my uncle says Ijuin and Natsuki are hiding somewhere in the tower?!"

"Uh, yeah," Ijuin replied. "We're in a secret room with some combat droids."

"I'm with him," said Natsuki. "They've been calling me here for a while now, saying they might need some extra hands soon or something. Didn't know this was what they had in mind."

Of the two of them, Ijuin was audibly the most shaken, but Natsuki sounded noticeably unamused. Yu could actually picture the samurai girl frowning for a change.

"Thank god," Aliya sighed. "Then help's on the way."

"Okay, slow down! We're still figuring out which droids to use," Ijuin said.

“I mean, I’d rather be saving lives and all, so I can be there soon, but I’m not gonna be very cute when I see your uncle. Just for the record.” Natsuki was indeed tilted.

Yu remembered what they had talked about a few days prior. He remembered the things he felt that day, myriad and wild though they were.

“Mark III,” Yu muttered. To the other self slumbering within him. “Armorize.”

Adaptive nanofactors, sparkling and many, enshrouded him at once, armoring him in a black and gold suit. The ends of the Holy Shroud around his neck fluttered in the wind behind him. Like two long wings.

“Ichinose! You did it!” Shiba cried. “And…so easily! I thought you couldn’t get it to work!”

“Everyone needs me,” Yu said.

Ein practically swooned as she studied his armored form. “You mean those words. More than any I’ve heard you speak before,” she said. “Are you ready, Yu?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “I’ll do it. I’ll be the person you’ve always known I can be.” It was a promise. To the partner who saw more in him. And to himself. “I’ve got to go! I’ll be back soon!”

“Do what you must,” said Ein. “We will hold the line until you return, by my word as queen!”

Yu activated the anti-gravity lifters and took off faster than a whirlwind. The air cracked as he instantly broke the sound barrier. He had felt sick on the day he faced the archmages. But not today.

Today he felt fine.

Yu reached his destination in just a dozen or so seconds, descending upon the wide roof of the three-hundred-meter tower.

“They’re supposed to be on the top floor,” he said to the Frame. “I need to get inside.”

The wind began to whirl as the Mark III transmitted the key signal, and a rectangle slid open in the floor to reveal an emergency exit. Yu leaped down into the observation lounge. Devicer Three in all his black and gold glory stood alone in the crowd of humans and elves.

“Three?!” an officer cried.

“We thought the elves had you!” shouted another.

“Well met, Asura of the skies!”

Soldiers and elves alike reacted with shock. Yu disregarded them and selected a weapon from his arsenal—the incapacitative paralytic sound propagator. A control window appeared on the Head Mounted Display in his visor.

“Let’s set the propagation nice and long,” he murmured inside his helmet. “One hundred eighty seconds should be good.”

Suddenly, a horrible, metallic screech whined from the Frame’s chestplate, and everyone in the lounge, both human and elf, collapsed from

the non-lethal sound waves. It went on for exactly one hundred and eighty seconds as the people lay helpless on the floor, some of them merely twitching in vain attempts to move.

When the noise finally stopped, not a single person had the energy to so much as lift a finger. Among the paralyzed, Yu spotted his friend.

"Was that necessary?" she groaned through the commlink. "I think I might be sick."

"Sorry, but I had to be safe. Unless you'd rather take a bullet in the cross fire."

Yu scanned the room and, to his surprise, saw several officers starting to stagger to their feet. The sylphlike elves were still down for the count, but the younger, more physically fit of the group had recovered rather quickly.

One of them was Sakuma. As he stumbled on his feet, he reached for his waist, unholstered his 9mm, and unsteadily aimed it at Devicer Three. "Y-You…" he stammered, voice shaking. "You're not Mizuki. Are you?"

His eyes were guarded behind a veil of caution. It was obvious at a glance that the Devicer before him wasn't nearly as tall or built as their predecessor. Yu was a scrawny fourteen-year-old, and the Mark III had formed itself to fit his body. And that was to say nothing of the Holy Shroud, an entirely new addition to the Frame's silhouette.

A mechanical *beep* sounded, drawing Yu's eyes to the word "target" that had appeared before him. Beneath it was Sakuma. Drawing his gun had marked the young captain as a threat.

All of a sudden, his death was a single order away.

These people are so caught up in violence and overthrowing the city that they're willing to completely ignore the real enemy, Yu thought. If I let them go, they might do it again.

It would be so easy to end it all here, now. How much safer the settlement would be without them. That was, after all, why Aliya's uncle had concocted this entire scheme. These people were dangerous. Sakuma could squeeze the trigger at *any moment*.

Yu lifted his hand and pointed his finger at him.

Pop!

A superhardened calcium bullet fired from the Mark III's hyper-compressed air gun. The armed officer was right there. He couldn't miss.

And yet, Sakuma still stood there. Stupefied.

"Who…are you?" he asked. "No one else can use the Mark III. Only Mizuki can!"

The bullet Yu shot hadn't been aimed at the man's head, but at his weapon. Yu had offset the targeting calibrations just enough to disarm him.

Sakuma and his men were criminals. Attempted insurrection, attempted magnicide, assault, kidnapping—their crimes warranted their lives. They were a danger to society and needed to be neutralized. Nadal would have agreed.

It would be so easy.

But Yu thought of their faces. The prideful military men. The angry, barbarous adults. The racists who lived in their bubbles. The people who would have done it to Ein, or Aliya, or any of the elves just because they were different.

There are a lot of bad people in the world, Yu thought. People I'll never agree with.

But Devicer Three would protect them anyway.

Yu turned on the voice changer. "Who am I?" he replied. His voice carried a theatrical confidence that sounded nothing like his usual self. "You said it yourself. I'm Devicer Three."

The haughty bravado wasn't the only thing tinting his identity, though. His voice came out shifted, distorted to sound completely androgynous.

"Y-You're a woman?!" Sakuma shouted.

"Maybe I am, maybe I'm not. What does it matter to you what my gender is?" Sakuma had no words. "There's something I want to say. To everyone."

Yu looked around the lounge, at the trembling soldiers who had pulled themselves up and their terrified faces. Everyone else was on their knees in reverent awe of the masked Devicer of black and gold. The elves had laid themselves before their king.

"I…am a defender," he said. "Yours. Everyone's. I am strong, so I protect the weak. When there is suffering before me, I will not be a bystander. When I see someone in need, I will do everything within my power to save them. Humans, elves, rich, poor, no matter who they are or where they come from."

It was almost impossible to believe that this was Yu. He thought of Ein as he spoke, drew on her confidence, and it gave him more strength than he could have possibly imagined. The words simply came to him, flowing like water.

"You will never know my face, and you will never know my name. But you will know me when I arrive to fight for those with no one to stand for them. Against my own kin if I must. You will know me as the one in the mask, the one who protects all they can."

Against friend. For the scum of society. For murderers and criminals. Yu would fight. Because it was just as Ein said. Good and evil are just two sides of the same coin.

The last thing Takeda did was save me back in Maizuru, he recalled. The private had not been good to Yu or Ijuin, but with his dying breath, he had done something right.

It was not Yu's place to be the judge of morality. His place was with Devicer Three, the one greater than he. The one who would protect all, wherever they were, however they could.

"I exist," he said, "for both of you."

Sakuma blinked. "Both?"

Yu nodded. "I will protect the elves, and I will protect the humans. Whatever your differences are, they don't matter to me, and you *will* put

them aside in my presence. Speaker, anything you have to say to the Defense Force can wait."

Nadal sluggishly and robotically collected himself off the floor with a simple grunt in reply, still fighting off the effects of the noise. Yu didn't entertain him this time.

"I'm going to need them for the time being," Device Three said firmly. "Until then, try to keep your meddling to a minimum."

Indirectly, this was an order to spare their lives.

Nadal bowed respectfully, much like he often would to Ein, and with all the decorum expected of a man who had once served in a royal court. "As you wish, my King of the Storm."

"'King of the Storm,'" Yu repeated. "Are you referring to me?"

"None other," he replied. "You rule the droids of the sky. And, if I may be so bold to say, your manner and aspect do evoke the stately image of a liege within me. Indeed, I can hear my queen's parting words to me as clear as day, even now."

"So this is how the elvish royalty were like, huh?"

"Earth has a similar concept, my liege. They call it 'noblesse oblige.' In other words, with great power comes great responsibility."

"No, I'm pretty sure you got that from a movie," the Devicer pointed out plainly. It was a nerve born out of the simple fact that, right now, he wasn't Yu Ichinose.

He used that momentum to address the Defense Force. "Well? Don't you have positions to be taking?" Yu pointed dramatically to the sky beyond the glass wall, where the amber aurora still hung, blanketing the world above in pillars of bewitching light. "The enemy is here. If you really do want to protect your fellow man, then stand and fight with me!"

The new Devicer Three was not as brawny nor as masculine as the last. On the contrary, their gender was a mystery to most. And yet, no one in that room came even close to the sheer presence they commanded.

There could be no individual more appropriate to be the savior of the world.

3

A castle stood in the middle of Wakayama Bay. The crystalline Paramian walls sat perched upon a lotus-shaped pedestal, massive yet unsinking, like a flower floating in a swamp. For weeks, it had only been a mirage, a shapeless form undulating on Nayuta's horizon. But precisely one hour ago, as evidenced by the lights shimmering in the sky, the crystal palace had materialized. No longer was it a ghost in the distance.

Scullchance chuckled to herself. "Go, my armies. Go and kill, burn, and conquer!"

The Lioness watched from atop her balcony overlooking the central courtyard, a sneer adorning her comely face. To humans, she had the youthfulness of a twelve- or thirteen-year-old girl, but her lips wove words

of violence beyond her years and her sharp eyes looked down on the soldiers with sadistic satisfaction.

The goblins were the first to leave the courtyard, carried by balloons on winds called by the archmage, drifting them along a magical current of air towards the settlement. Scaly merfolk dove into the water from the petals of the lotus pedestal, tridents in hand. And among the winged beasts were even the kings of them all—dragons. Although they were smaller than most breeds, Scullchance was impressed enough by their shrewd nature to have chosen eight of the most ferocious white dragons.

But there was still more to come. Scullchance gazed down at the expanse of blue before her from the crystal palace's heights, as she conjured the spell for a most special guest.

"Turn, alatchakra! Oh, great wheel of flame! Bring unto this world a raging torrent of scarlet destruction!"

At the point where her gaze met the ocean, the water began to heave, until a violent tower of lava erupted from the depths. Scullchance could cast A-class spells, slaughter hundreds in the blink of an eye, but this—this she took her time on.

Gunshots filled the air. Nayuta's harbor had become a war zone once more. Merfolk leaped from the water while goblins struck from above, their numbers easily totaling over a thousand. A militia force of about four hundred stood their ground against them. Anyone confident enough was taking shots at the balloons, attempting to drop the goblins before they could land, but it was like shooting into an ant hill, and the merfolk had already outnumbered them.

The militia fortified themselves behind portable barricades originally intended for use against terrorists, firing wildly into the increasing amount of attackers. Most of the defenders were using AK-47 copies, favored for their ease of use and distributed for free to all registered militia members. It went without saying, of course, that arming the population was dangerous for local safety and security, but the Anomalies were just too much of a threat.

7.62mm rounds pelted the merfolk, penetrating their armored scales much easier than before with the increased firepower. Goblins, too, were riddled with holes and fell in droves. And yet it wasn't enough.

"We could really use a few more good guys on our side!" Executive Shiba yelled. He was huddled behind one of the barricades, but not in order to take potshots. In his hands, instead of a gun, was a controller, and he was currently remotely operating a basketball-shaped military droid attached to a propeller and shooting down goblin after goblin with its machine gun. "This is why I quit the military, damn it!"

"But you shoot well!" Ein noted, firing her new rifle and adding to her ever-growing body count. "I underestimated you, Shiba!" The Type 20 had been meant to replace the Type 89 a few years ago, with its shorter body

and greater resistance to water, but it never managed to displace its predecessor in time. Ein found it quite punctual in their current situation, though. She frowned. “Out of ammo. I need your gun and any spare ammunition you have.”

“Be my guest! Not like I could hit the broad side of a freakin’ barn anyway!” One of the AK-47 duplicates lay strewn to his side. Ein quickly picked it up and promptly placed the crosshairs between an unlucky gremlin’s eyes. Unfortunately, the ammo wasn’t compatible with her now-discarded Type 20. “Hey, didn’t anyone tell you which weapons we’d be using? It’s pretty convenient when you can share bullets.”

“Oh, I heard.” She pulled the trigger and the goblin’s head popped. “I simply don’t see the romance in using what everyone else is. I’m very particular about my appearance, even in battle.”

“You do know this is a war, not a fashion show, right?”

Ein whipped around and scowled. “Shiba, they’re flanking us!”

The militia’s main force had taken cover facing the ocean, where the merfolk and goblins were attacking from, but a new contingent was quickly encroaching from behind—pig-faced trolls. Over five hundred of them. The behemoth super soldiers stomped closer, clad in full black armor and wielding giant battle-axes. Overhead, a number of white dragons were swooping beneath the clouds.

Shiba pulled his hair in frustration. “How did they get *there*?! And *dragons*?! You’ve got to be *kidding* me!”

“Firstly, I expect they were teleported. It would be child’s play for the Dharva. Secondly, pincer maneuvers are an elementary tactic.” Ein fired the AK. The bullet shot towards a gap in the troll’s armor, only for it to be deflected at the last moment. A Projectile Protection spell—the bane of humanity. The fae creatures sneered in satisfaction. Some roared and charged, bringing their axes down hard on their fleshy, defenseless enemies. Ein unsheathed a vicious kukri machete. “I suggest you find yourself a new weapon, Shiba!”

“How many times do I have to tell you people that I can’t fight?!”

Shiba had tears in his eyes, and he wasn’t alone. The militia fired on the trolls in vain while others warily prepared military sabers, spades, or anything else that could pass as a close-range weapon. But the enemy towered over them at three meters tall. They were no match, and the screams of the dying quickly replaced the gunfire.

“We were supposed to be safe!” someone cried.

“It’s a massacre! God, please, someone!”

The battlefield was a spectacle of blood and gore. But just then, they appeared. The one in black and gold arrived in the sky above the harbor, quick as the wind, the Holy Shroud fluttering at their back. It was Devicer Three.

Ein, of course, knew that “they” was actually “he,” and she cried out, “Yu!”

She also knew what had happened. The words he'd spoken at Central Tower. The path he'd chosen. She'd heard it all via commlink.

She began to chant the droids' Gospel Code.

—Witness the truth. Envision vajra.

—See, says the Enlightened One, true strength in tathata.

—Give form to invincible serenity, flawless as the full moon.

Upon receipt of the command words, English text began to scroll across the Mark III's HMD.

```
[Mantra Server Startup Complete. All PRAJNA running.]
[System Now Booting Spellbook VAJRA-SEKHARA SUTRA...]
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No words were necessary between the two fated partners.

"Thanks, Ein!" Yu said. "Let's start with the one we used last time!"

"Understood!"

Yu hovered motionlessly over the fighting, but not as himself. As Devicer Three. Arms crossed as if he were above it all metaphorically, just as he was physically.

Particles of light glittered from his body, the nano-sized machines cultivating themselves into auxiliary droids with fiendishly long talons—MUV Crow Gauntlets. Yu had used two on himself in Full-Armor mode before, but that wouldn't be enough this time. In the blink of an eye, 3,696 robotic arms formed around the Mark III.

"Am I looking at the thousand-armed Kannon right now?!" Ijuin hollered over the commlink.

His exaggerated amazement was warranted for once. The arms arrayed themselves around the nonchalant Devicer in an enormous, intimidating circle as rays of light descended from gaps in the clouds, illuminating the black Asura Frame and all its minions in a golden luster.

From the center of the awesome sight, Yu bellowed in a clear and strong voice, both masculine and feminine, "Guns will not avail us against the trolls. They're yours!"

The arms moved at once, shimmering like the edges of three thousand swords as they struck down with the speed of a falcon honing in on a measly field mouse. And just as mercilessly did they slice the troll's throats and crush their heads with keen talons—five on each droid, which they brandished as dexterously as one might a sword. The fae fell dead one after the other, sliced and gored in dramatic fashion.

Such a display couldn't possibly go unnoticed. The humans were overrun, and there were many who were saved from a raised axe just in time. Fighters trembling behind barricades did a double take when they saw the glinting metal in the sky. Once they finally realized the source of their disembodied reinforcements, the fires of their courage were reignited.

"Is that…Three?"

"He's here! He's back! He's really back!"

“That’s the Mark III’s droid division! We can win this!”

And there were others joining the fight as well. Rushing to the front lines in trucks, cars, and armored military vehicles was the Defense Force, returned from the coup attempt that Devicer Three had put a stop to. Their solution to the trolls’ immunity to bullets was simple—they simply ran them over. And the merfolks’ scales might as well have been papier-mâché against their heavy machine guns. The same could be said for the goblins’ balloons.

Yu watched the tide of war change as the Defense Force’s elite squads, equipped with assault rifles and N-Type Exo-Frames, took to the field. That’s when he noticed something.

“I’m not even close to max power yet,” he murmured.

The Prayer Wheel embedded in his waist was whirring as it spun, generating immense amounts of energy, both electrical and magical. But controlling the legion of over three thousand auxiliary droid arms was, to the Frame, as effortless as wiggling one’s toe inside a cramped boot.

“Yu! The Frame’s nanofactors have been replenished to full strength!” Ein transmitted.

“You’re right. That’s…a lot of zeros! Seven *trillion*?!”

“It seems you’ve returned to form. And more! You’re twice the warrior you were before, Yu! I’m proud of you!”

“It’s all the Asura Frame, really,” Yu replied sheepishly.

The artificial god of destruction was a machine given the form of a man—a hybrid of device and organism. It was what allowed the suit to harmonize with its Devicer, to dynamically change with its user’s mental state. Yu finally understood that it was his indecision that had caused the Frame’s constant instability.

“The time has come to unleash Pandemonium in all its glory!” Ein declared. “The King of the Storm and all his legions are yours to command!”

“You mean the fifty thousand. That complete droid complement Ijuin’s always going on about,” Yu said. “All right, let’s do it!”

“Are we doing the thing?!” Ijuin chimed in.

Yu locked onto his position. A lab in Central Tower. Perfect.

“But I don’t know if I’ll be able to control them all at once,” Yu added. “Ijuin, I’ll need your help. Like before.”

“M-Me?”

“I need to be Devicer Three. I want you to lead the Pandemonium droids.”

“Every general needs a lieutenant…” Ijuin murmured. He seemed to finally understand something. “Leave it to me! You do your thing, and I’ll do mine!”

“Yu— I mean, Three,” Aliya interjected. “We have eight white dragons on us at Central Tower! I think they’re coming right for our throat!”

“I’m on my way,” Yu said at once.

“Are we slaying dragons now?” Natsuki joined in. “Nice! Leave one for me!”

“I’ll see what I can do on my end,” said Aliya.

“By the way, Yu, I like your new act. If we all make it out of this, I’ve got another noogie ready just for you!” Natsuki added.

“And you will have to enlighten me as to what this ‘noogie’ is,” Ein said pointedly.

Listening to his friends, Yu realized something. He was a weak, small man, and he needed a mask to become anything more than that. But weak though he may be, the people he cared about were with him. Supporting him.

Devicer Three wasn’t just one person anymore. It was all of them. As long as they were together, as weak as he was, he knew…

“I can do this!” Devicer Three cried. “Mark III, by the name of Rudra, release your armies!”

4

“Holy crap, these numbers.” Ijuin’s eyes went wide. “That Prayer Wheel puts out insane energy. Three gigajoules per second… Wow. And this ‘prana’ thing is the unit for magic, I’m guessing. Seventy thousand per second. They weren’t kidding when they said he blew the last Devicer out of the water.”

He was in the autonomous droid lab on Central Tower’s twenty-fifth floor. During the coup, he’d hidden himself in a secret room and used his nanomachines to hack everything he could for information. But when the situation changed and the Anomalies became the primary threat, he rushed to the testing room he and Shiba often used. The empty space made it perfect for keeping up a multitude of three-dimensional holograms.

“Let’s see, I need the Mark III’s specs, a map of the settlement, air surveillance, ally positions…” Ijuin waved his hands, his eyes darting from one place to the next. “Screw it, just show me everything!” Images and stereoscopic projections appeared at his command. His nanomachines served the same purpose as the sages’ wrist computers. “Now how do we allocate this energy… But there’s so many options! Which ones do I go with?”

“Ijuin. Shiba has something to tell you. I’ll patch him in now.”

“Lady Ein?!”

“Ijuin.” Shiba’s voice followed. “I just sent a list to you via Ein. It contains my own recommended selections. I hope it helps!”

“Thanks!” Another window manifested before him, and he proceeded to send its contents to the Mark III via commlink with his good pal, Devicer Three. More specifically, however, the data was transmitted to the ashen stone in the Frame’s chest. “The Ars Magna Unit,” he muttered. “If that’s the key to droid cultivation, then I’m counting on you!”

The ring of light glowed in his palm as he sent the order.

"Um, appreciate the assist, Ein."

"It was nothing. I only synchronized my nanomachines with your...laptop, I believe it was called?" Ein was unfazed by the older man's awkward politeness. Earlier, she had been using her right palm to connect herself with the computer on Shiba's lap, who then promptly and very hastily put together the file for upload. "We're all playing our part. It's time I play mine."

The elf girl closed her eyes and took a deep breath, focusing her mind. The world fell away. There was no war. There was no fear.

Militia volunteers and former Defense Force soldiers were fighting for their lives alongside the MUV Crow Gauntlets that continued to enact Yu's orders. Much of the hulking fae had been culled by their talons, and now they were seeing to the destruction of the goblins and merfolk. And the arm droids did so with gruesome efficiency, making use of a multitude of hidden armaments, from air guns in their fingertips to electromagnetic heat radiators in their palms.

And now it was time for the queen to take up her own sword.

Ein stood tall, and with a resounding voice ringing straight from the core of her gut, she sang a heaven-bound verse to the King of the Storm.

—Oh, Traveler. Heed me, oh Traveler,
—Wanderer of the realm and distances vast,
—Rejoice, oh Siddha. The awakening has begun.

"Ein's Gospel!" Yu cried.

The Prayer Wheel picked up speed, until the whirring became chanting. A chorus of souls, of the priests and priestesses residing within the Wheel of Orison.

"Gate Gate Paragate! Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha! Gate Gate Paragate! Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha!"

And then, the nanofactors gushed out in more abundance than ever before. Even the somber and meager tints of sunlight that absconded through both the amber aurora and the rolling clouds were blotted by the trillions of particles. As the Mark III sped over the settlement, the golden sheet blanketed the city below, droids beginning to emerge from the shimmering, primordial sea in the sky.

Ten thousand MUV Chakrams, the very first Yu had used. With their tapered, serrated edges, the bladed rings set out in search of prey to lacerate, be they on land, in water, or airborne.

There was much use to be found in the MUV Clay-Dolls as well, despite their deceptive appearance. The dolls were barely a meter tall and had stubby, immobile limbs, coupled with an oversized head and pair of eyes,

and they normally served reconnaissance purposes, but now their mission was to seek out and aid allies in need. Of these, there were five thousand.

Aiding these droids were twenty thousand MUV Hippocrates—paper-esque droids about the shape and thickness of a poker card. They would fly about in search of those needing medical attention, then attach themselves to afflicted areas, stopping bleeding, acting as an antitoxin, and administering emergency medications directly in the field.

But these were on the smaller end of soldiers in the battalion.

"I'm sending these to the tower!" Ijuin said. "The dragons are really—Whoa! I swear I just saw something white fly by the window just now!"

"I trust you, Ijuin," said Yu. "Protect the elves!"

One of the largest among Rudra's army was the MUV Puppeteer—the massive forearm and fist of a giant robot turned loyal familiar that was at least the size of a fighter jet. Six of these rocketed towards the middle of the city.

And with them were six fighter jets of a much more literal variety—MUV Silent Raptor. At the front of their sharp, angular forms, though, were two arms with perfectly opposable thumbs. The right of which was holding a hand axe. This variety of droid could engage in dogfights on both land and in the air.

Among the machines in the thick of it was a more subtle division.

A window appeared in Yu's visor. "Someone needs help."

One thousand MUV Bumblebees were monitoring the situation from above, all over the city. Yu confirmed the coordinates of the report one had just sent him and descended at once.

At the edge of the outer block, in one of the more urban areas, a lone, middle-aged man was screaming and firing his Type 89 wildly. Whether he had been separated from the main force on the front lines or simply decided he would fight alone, it mattered little to the goblins who were closing in on their target. The gremlins were taking their time to enjoy this one.

The man had taken out at least half of them in his frenzy, but his luck had just run out.

"God damn it!"

He was fresh out of bullets. The goblins heard the clack of his trigger but no gunshot, and they nocked their poison arrows with nasty grins.

And that was when Yu arrived. He held out his hand and fired a volley of superhardened calcium bullets, instantly decimating the enemy.

"I may not be there to save you again," he said in Devicer Three's androgynous voice. "But I'm glad I was this time."

"Th-Three!" the man blubbered, stopping Yu moments before he started to take off again. Yu looked back and realized that he recognized him. It was the drunk who had vilified Devicer Three after the merfolk attack a few days ago. He prepared himself for another round of insults, but the man was silent for a while, until finally, he said, "You're back."

“So it would seem.” Yu might have had more words to say had the man said he was “alive,” but the fact that he hadn’t was likely meaningless.

The man reeked of booze and his uniform was a mess, his beard unkempt, both born out of a lack of desire to rectify either. He was a pitiful sight. But in his eyes, as they gazed up at Devicer Three, was a glint of lucidity.

“You don’t remember me?” he asked. “You saved me before too. Remember? It was raining.”

His face was bright with adoration for his hero. The anger he had felt had likely not come from malice, but betrayal. Disillusionment from being abandoned by the one he looked up to more than anyone.

“And I’ll do it again if I can, but I can’t promise you anything,” Yu said through the voice changer. “If you’re out of bullets or too tired to fight, find somewhere to hide.”

“No,” the man said firmly. His words suddenly had weight, now that they weren’t slurred. “I’ll get reloaded and keep up the fight. That’s what you’re doing, isn’t it?”

Yu lightly waved his hand in place of a reply. The next instant, he was high in the air.

He learned something just now. That man—his will had been lost at the bottom of a bottle, and yet he’d been moved by Devicer Three. He’d displayed respect. This, Yu discovered, was another aspect of what it meant to be a hero.

“Three!” Aliya called. “Look! This is happening near the portal-keep!”

Footage appeared in Yu’s visor and began to play. “That’s—Is that a giant?!”

In the waters near Nayuta, directly next to the crystalline castle, a stream of lava was erupting from the ocean, and it was morphing. Changing. Into something anthropomorphic. Limbs sprouted and bubbled from the fiery torrent, and three cavities were hollowed out on the face—two eyes and a mouth.

The bottom half of the gelatinous lava colossus was concealed beneath the ocean, and the water around its waist boiled violently. From there to its head alone, the monster measured 118 meters tall, dwarfing many of the surrounding buildings.

“I can’t identify it! It’s either extremely rare, or the archmage created it entirely themself!” Aliya was flustered. Yu could hear it. “Its functional name for now will be ‘lava giant’!”

“Roger that. Heading there now.”

They would have to manage against the dragons at Central Tower on their own. The anti-gravity lifters carried Yu across the city at max speed, towards the newborn, burning leviathan.

Central Tower stood, fittingly, in the middle of the central block at three hundred meters tall, with the giant, imitation Prayer Wheel towering at

sixty meters nearby. Together, the two buildings supported the needs and wants of the entire settlement—making them high value targets during a war. The perfect prey to send eight white dragons after.

“I’ll handle defense of the tower and the wheel!” Aliya shouted.

“Thanks! I don’t know how I was gonna do that *and* manage the droids around the city at the same time,” Ijuin replied with audible relief.

When Aliya had first made it to the droid lab’s testing room, it took her a minute to process the sight she saw there. Ijuin sat cross-legged in the middle of a kaleidoscope of holograms projected all around the room. He stared at the floor where bird’s-eye footage of Nayuta depicted enemy and ally positions with dots of varying colors, each corresponding to a different kind of droid or Anomaly. No further information was given. No name tags, no numbers, no data. But the scant amount of information was plenty for Ijuin, and the *abundance* of information being displayed by the myriad holograms similarly bothered him none.

“Medical, focus on that area,” he muttered, pointing with a baton he’d found from lord knows where. “Kannon Team, deploy to the shopping streets and flush out any stragglers.”

If a device was nano-compatible, Ijuin could crack it. He parsed the constant flow of information, deciphered the best course of action, and enacted it like a conductor to his orchestra, or a shogi player to his pieces.

“You know,” Aliya started to say before she could stop herself, “you almost look pretty cool, for the chubby nerd character.”

“We do not fat-shame in this house, Aliya!”

Meanwhile, just outside the window, a surreal dogfight was underway between the eight dragons and the squadron of giant arms and fighter planes. Aliya quickly turned to step outside and link up with the droids.

The enemies were officially designated as “white dragons,” and this particular breed of drake trended towards the smaller end of the spectrum, generally reaching about fifteen meters in length. But what they lacked in raw strength, they made up for with pure speed and dexterity. Even compared to their red relatives, who could dance across the sky like a swallow, these beasts were unmatched in the air.

A jet-black MUV Silent Raptor tailed one of the dragons endlessly, firing from behind, but a fraction of a second was all it needed to lose sight of its target. The creature sensed the danger with its animalistic instincts, swiveled out of the way, then reappeared behind the Silent Raptor in an instant.

White dragons hunted with deadly ice breath, inducing frostbite in their prey by emitting a frigid flurry from their maws that also pelted their foe with pointy icicles. Pilots the world over had met their end to that very attack.

Not even missiles, supersonic jets, or any other modern long-range weaponry had proved consistently effective against the otherworldly reptiles. Nothing could match their reaction speed, their beastly instincts,

their sheer power—but most troublesome of all was, as always, their magical nature. Even when targeted by an auto-tracking missile, the monsters could seemingly vanish out of its path, only to reemerge from nothing and shoot it down with their breath. If it had been an F-15 fighter jet, the machinery would subsequently fail and the pilot would freeze to death in the cockpit.

But the MUV Silent Raptors *had* no pilots. The anti-gravity lifters allowed the Silent Raptor to practically swim through the air and reposition itself behind the dragon once more. It fired again, but too late. The dragon was already gone. The beast came directly from above this time, reaching down to slam the jet with its hind legs. Too late again. The Silent Raptor swerved right back behind the dragon.

Central Tower was swarming with similar dogfights all over—a never-ending game of tag between the droids and the drakes. Had the Silent Raptors been occupied by pilots, they would have been long dead from the insane g-forces. The maneuvers they were conducting wouldn't have been possible. But still, the stalemate showed no sign of ending.

"Now!" Aliya thrust out her fist, and a MUV Puppeteer hurled itself towards a dragon in the heat of a chase. The steel fist slammed into the snowy reptile's body and pummeled it straight into the ground. "Finish it!"

One of the fighter jets broke off and descended with fluidity so graceful that not even a VTOL could have replicated the motion. And it did so while holding a hand axe. Sound waves propagated through the edge, creating a vibroblade, and it hummed through the air as the arm brought it down over the dragon's neck—a hair too slow. The dragon, a beast driven into a corner with nothing to lose, sprang up and dodged the blow. It landed back on the ground on all fours and took a wide, firm stance. It almost looked like a dinosaur.

Aliya was not entertained, however.

"Ugh, what am I supposed to do?!" she groaned.

"I might have an idea!"

Natsuki kicked off the ground and up to the grounded dragon's snout. With a flutter of her peony furisode and a flash of her monomolecular blade, she buried the katana deep into the beast's eye.

The dragon roared, at last in pain. Natsuki, despite what her usual antics might lead one to believe, could not fly, and she had been waiting patiently for just this moment.

"Whoa!"

"Natsuki!"

But the dragon easily flung the girl off with a sharp flick of its head. The white monster beat its wings angrily and took to the air once more, unconcerned with the pest on the ground.

"Gah, this isn't gonna work! This guy makes my sword look like a toothpick!"

Natsuki stuck the landing and emerged unscathed. Unfortunately, not even the kabukimono samurai girl could stand up to the king of reptiles. Aliya's shoulders slumped dejectedly.

"Wait..." she murmured suddenly.

Aliya ordered the droids to continue as they were and scurried out of the lab. Ijuin was too focused to even notice her leave.

She flew into the elevator, rode it down to the ninth floor, then dashed into the Other World Archive for Culturally Significant Artifacts—otherwise known as the Treasury. Hurrying through and around the various items on display, she came to one in particular and stopped.

"Natsuki, do you have a minute?" Aliya asked through the commlink.

"You know I love our chats, but I'm sorta fighting a dragon right now," she replied. "Can it wait?"

"Not if you want to win." There, inside a display case all by itself, was the Green Dragon Crescent Blade. And below its deadly, curved edge, down the long shaft at the ferrule, was a wheel. "There's a weapon here, and I think it has a Prayer Wheel. A small one, like the Mark III has."

"Wait, *what*?!"

Aliya's head started to tingle.

EXPLICATIONS

| PARAM AND THE ELVISH KINGDOMS |

Yu: So we were in the space between Earth and the other side, right? Then if we'd gone in the right direction, would we have ended up in your home, Ein?

Ein: Of course. Beyond the Void lies our soil—the lands of Param.

Aliya: Apparently my mom and uncle used to live in some place called the Wind Kingdom.

Ein: Vibhram'ladri. It was ruled by my original, Queen Liricamaja. There were the Earth, Fire, and Water Kingdoms as well, each governed by sovereigns descended from the old blood of Yakshia, of which there are four holy lines.

Yu: "Were"?

Ein: The ones you call the archmages laid waste to them.

| ANOMALY NOMENCLATURE |

Yu: I've been wondering about that "Yakshia" word. I heard it a lot from Professor Chloe, and from Ein too.

Ijuin: Yeah, same. What's it mean? Is it a race?

Ein: Exactly. In our tongue, the term "Yakshia" functionally serves the same purpose as your "elf" does. Likewise, what you call "demons," we would normally call "rakshasa." We simply adapted our nomenclature for the sake of ease of communication on Earth.

Aliya: ...I think that was Nadal's idea, wasn't it?

Ijuin: Was it?!

Aliya: Pretty sure. He went nuts for movies and games after coming here, and he noticed that the elves in RPGs and fantasy and stuff resembled his people surprisingly closely.

Yu: So they saw the coincidence and ran with it?

Aliya: To quote my uncle, “It is highly unlikely that this is mere happenstance. Rather, it would stand to reason that both of our worlds, Earth and Param, were once connected closely enough that we could intermingle, share knowledge, and blend cultures.”

Ein: He theorized that the human perception of elves was based on stories of our people, passed down through the ages.

Ijuin: So you applied the same idea to the Anomalies and made it nice and accessible for us Earthlings. Huh.

Chapter 5: Across Sky and Ocean

1

The docks where the Anomalies had first landed effectively became the front lines, but because water and air weren't the only means the enemy had of transporting troops, the fighting had spread to all over Nayuta, from the outer block to the central one. Teleportation magic could send fresh meat all the way from the portal-keep to anywhere in the city. It could be cyclopes; it could be half-man, half-cow minotaurs with axes and clubs; giant, three-headed Cerberus dogs; or even five-story-tall bronze golems—constructs with literal molten bronze for blood that would scald anyone who managed to put a crack in them. Anything could appear without warning.

But they all shared one thing in common—no mere human could stand up to them. Not even in groups. The enemy was that overwhelming.

Such was the force threatening the residents of Nayuta. They shouldn't have lasted as long as they had. A dozen or so random people with a few guns didn't stand a chance against the behemoths, Anomalies that could have taken a tank head on, maybe even two. And yet, somehow, *they did*.

The droids cleaned up the invincible enemies with casual ease. Ten thousand MUV Chakrams turned the Anomalies' flesh and bones into strips, the spinning blades dredging up fountains of blood. And although the MUV Clay-Dolls lacked hard firepower, in groups they could make ant tunnels out of their foes or paralyze them with stun guns. All the while, the three thousand arms of metal with talons like swords—the MUV Crow Gauntlets—acted with the Mark III's own might. Slicing, crushing, shooting. Wherever they went, many fell.

"How quaint. The apes have learned to fight."

Scullchance sat in her chamber. Not on a chair, of course—on her golden-maned lion. The beast dozed, its eyes drearily narrowed like a house cat with a full belly. The archmage, too, had her eyes closed, though not for an afternoon nap. She was watching over the battle with senses unnatural, by the ways of Kanzeon, the hearer of a thousand voices.

"Our forces are looking rather low," she mused. "Spirits, go. Tear them asunder."

The mage did not deign to even open her eyes to cast the summoning spell, or to deliver the order. Ijuin would have been in awe. She could do in a thoughtless second what he needed the nanomachines to do, and even then only with immense focus. Beneath the archmage's eyes, images flitted by, delivering developments on the field. Within her ears, she could hear the voices of the settlement.

"We could really use a few more good guys on our side!"

"Aaargh!"

"Is that...Three?"

"You're twice the warrior you were before."

“I may not be there to save you again, but I’m glad I was this time.”

“You’re back.”

She could feel his presence. She could see him. The warrior approaching her transient castle at speeds beyond sound. The one who witnessed the truth, in all his black and gold splendor.

“I knew you could not resist, wielder of the Shroud! Come to me, oh Vajra One!”

Never would she speak that dreadful name of his—*Devicer Three*. Though dishonest she would be if she were to claim not to be exhilarated by his arrival. Why else would she have prepared such a special guest, if not to see the masked warrior meet a dramatic end at the hands of the bringer of Ragnarok?

Scullchance roused her lazy body and made for the top of her palace, where she could watch the spectacle with eyes of her own.

“Hey, it just me, or are our friends changing tactics?!”

“No, it’s not just you, Volonov!”

“They’re sending reinforcements that our guns don’t work against. We’re gonna be in deep shit before long!”

Shiba and the Russian man had met up again around the warehouses of the harbor, where the fighting was still the most violent. Ein was with the executive, because despite his lack of nerve, he was the closest thing they had to a commander.

The elf girl pricked up her ears, listening for the wind’s movements. “The Chosen Dharva are clever tacticians,” she said. “They can adapt to changes in the battlefield as naturally as they breathe.”

“Wish we had some of that on our side,” Shiba griped.

The wind whipped by. It was picking up, and it wasn’t a mere ocean breeze. Just then, a soldier was swept into the air by a spiraling gust. He ascended quickly, screaming as he did, before the wind suddenly dropped him. When he landed, the screaming stopped.

The gales were an army of air elementals—spirits of the wind, whirlwinds with a conscious will. Against a foe with no corporeal form, guns were useless, and they were swirling all around the settlement. The creatures flung trolls and goblins with no regard for friend or foe as they snatched everything up, then let them fall to a most gruesome death. This ironically made the droids’ jobs somewhat easier, but the dragons, troublesome as they were, flew unhindered by the tempests.

They had to stop those elementals.

“We’ll never stand a chance without the King of the Storm or his Holy Shroud,” Ein said, biting her lip in frustration. “But Yu and his allies are fighting battles of their own. We have to manage by ourselves.”

She took shelter behind one of the warehouses, carefully keeping away from the violent winds. It was all she could do, and it aggravated her.

Volonov, hiding nearby, clicked his tongue. “Yeah, I can see that thing from here. Kid’s got his hands full.”

The glowing, red colossus off the coast of Nayuta was hard not to notice, even with half its body submerged. The lava giant’s viscous torso had to measure a hundred meters by itself alone.

Ein could feel him—Devicer Three—hovering before the enemy. This was his battle.

“It’s right here, Natsuki! Mystery Weapon X, straight out of the Three Kingdoms!”

“You’re right. That wheel looks just like Yu’s!” Natsuki pointed to the bottom end of the weapon Aliya had brought down to the tower’s entrance. Apparently, she’d hacked the security system with her nanomachines, cracked open the case, and carried the Green Dragon something-or-other here all by herself.

Problem was, the thing was ridiculously heavy. She’d had to get an anthropomorphic support droid to even lift it off the ground.

Natsuki took the weapon from the droid—“Oof!”—and then promptly almost dropped it. Her nanomachines enhanced every muscle in her body, and every muscle meant *every muscle*. With a punch, she could launch a grown man a solid seven meters, eight if she was motivated. But this single weapon was her match.

It took everything Natsuki had to keep it in her hands. “So, uh, how much does this thing weigh?! A hundred kilos?! Scratch that, *three* hundred! Final answer!”

“It’s that bad?!”

“I mean, cool weapon and all, Aliya, but I’m not sure how useful it’s gonna be!” It was unprecedented for Natsuki to throw in the towel. She inspected the weapon. Its blade, curved like a scimitar, was about as long as her katana. The shaft was even longer and evocative of a naginata, but on a closer look, she noticed that it was made of metal, not wood. At the very end, where the ferrule would normally be, was a wheel. “You said this is the same as the one Yu has?”

“Something about it makes me feel…restless,” Aliya said. “It’s like I can feel *people* inside it. Praying something.”

“A wheel of prayers, huh? But hold on a minute,” said Natsuki. “I thought these mini Prayer Wheels were only used in the twelve Asura Frames.”

“R-Right. Which would mean…”

Before Aliya could finish, a dragon landed hard on the ground in front of them, wings spread wide. A fleshy, red gash stood out where its right eye should have been. It glared down at Natsuki with its remaining left, a gaze filled with acidic vitriol.

“Oof, yikes, this is awkward,” she said. “That was definitely me.”

“D-Do you think it wants to get even?!” Aliya stuttered.

“I don’t know why else he’d be here!” Natsuki exclaimed. “Get inside! I’ll handle this!”

“You can’t! You said yourself that your sword’s not enough!”

Natsuki tossed aside the strange weapon and unsheathed the monomolecular blade on her back, pointing it at the beast. At the sharp end stood a monster of fifteen meters in length, magnified by its vast wingspan, and on the other was a samurai girl one-tenth its size, yet no less ferocious.

Aliya quickly knelt down and held her hand out towards the Prayer Wheel at the end of the fallen Green Dragon Crescent Blade. If she was right, if that generator was the same source of power that the Mark III drew from, then it had to be one of the Asura series.

“Please, do something!” she cried. “Whatever iteration you are, you have to awaken!”

They’d spent days and days doing this exact experiment back in Maizuru, and now it was all she had. She transmitted the awakening signal from the nanomachines in her right hand, expecting it to fail, expecting this to be it.

“What…?”

But then, it began to spin. Aliya listened to the whirring in disbelief. When the noise reached Natsuki, she broke into a wide grin, threw her sword away, and opened her palm towards the ground.

“If you’re feeling up for it, I could use some help!” she yelled.

A fraction of a second later and the dragon was bringing its leg down on the girl, claws glinting and bearing all of its crushing weight. But another fraction later and its foot was arcing through the air. Blood sprayed from the monster’s amputated ankle, and it roared in agony.

“Yeah, I’m actually a bit of a pro when it comes to naginatas and polearms,” Natsuki gloated. “Unless you wanna call my bluff, lizard.”

Natsuki flourished the Green Dragon Crescent Blade and cracked a haughty smile at her new best friend.

JOE TAKEDUKI

《 ILLUST. 》
SHIRABII

02

The King's Return

FANTASY INBOUND

The Green Dragon was as light as a wooden practice sword, and it owed its newfound weightlessness to the anti-gravity lifters that had come online just in time. Natsuki brandished the guandao-shaped Asura Frame with such litheness, it was as if she were handling it on the surface of the moon.

The dragon snapped at her, but in the blink of an eye she whirled the blade and struck the beast's snout four times in quick succession.

"You've got some tricks up your sleeve," Natsuki remarked to her new toy.

Somehow intuiting the weapon's capabilities, she activated the anti-gravity lifters and floated into the air, at last eye-level with the behemoth. The bloodied beast recoiled.

"No hard feelings!"

Natsuki buried the Crescent Blade into the dragon's forehead, and with the guandao deep in the Anomaly's skull, she selected the electromagnetic contactor function and activated it through the nano-interface in her right hand. An electrical current flowed from the odd Asura Frame and into the white dragon. Its heart immediately stopped, and the beast collapsed heavily onto the ground.

"There's number one! Do I see a second?" Natsuki never let go of that devil-may-care attitude, but her words carried all the weight they needed.

She landed back on the ground, before hurling the Crescent Blade at one of the white dragons mid-flight. The Asura Frame laughed in the face of gravity as it pierced the monster's chest.

"Let's see that zappy thing again!"

Another violent current of electricity assailed the dragon, and down the second fell. The earth rumbled from the impact as Natsuki snatched the returning guandao out of the air.

"Aw, you came back! Who's a good boy?"

"I thought I felt something." Ein's voice suddenly came through over the commlink. "Natsuki, have you awakened Vritra? The Mark VI Asura Frame?!"

"Oh, this is the Mark VI, huh? I thought it was in Russia," Natsuki said. "So Vritra's your name." She whirled the guandao Asura around spiritedly like a martial arts display. "I like it!"

Aliya, who had been spectating the whole performance, pointed her right palm at Vritra. "After Russia's Eastern Front fell, it was recovered and brought to Nayuta for safekeeping. But it was dormant, waiting for its Devicer like the Mark III was. At least, that's what I can tell from its awareness." She took a deep breath, parsing the information she had read by synchronizing her nanomachines with the Frame. "It seems like the design philosophy for this Asura Frame was pure offense. A glass cannon, if you will."

"Huh, sounds like we're not so different!" Natsuki said.

“That must be why it chose you,” said Ein. “Natsuki, there’s something I need you and Vritra to do!”

There was still no end in sight for the ceaseless game of cat and mouse going on in the air around the tower. Meanwhile, the invisible air elementals had turned Nayuta into a vortex of deadly winds.

Natsuki listened to the Replicant girl’s instructions and smirked.

“It is our opening act, after all! I wouldn’t want to disappoint!”

2

When lava erupted from a volcano, it tended to flow slowly enough that most could outrun it on foot. Less than four kilometers per hour, Yu had heard somewhere. So it was no exaggeration to call the jets of molten rock spurting towards Devicer Three a little bit unnatural. They exploded from all over the massive giant, miniature superspeed eruptions, aimed straight for the black and gold warrior.

Yu groaned as he strained himself to weave through it all. The Mark III’s warning sensors blared nonstop.

The lava torrents were clocking in at over seven hundred kilometers an hour, but even that was trivial to the Frame. What gave him trouble was the fact that they were unpredictable. They could come from anywhere—the face, the neck, the shoulders, arms, chest, stomach, back. It was relentless in its onslaught.

As Yu struggled to dodge the barrage, he soon realized that things were not as bad as they could have been. Because they were about to get worse.

“You’re kidding me!” he shouted.

The lava giant raised its molten arm and threw its fist at him. Despite how beautiful a jab it was, the Asura Frame could have dodged it with time to spare...had Yu not already been preoccupied with avoiding the searing geysers.

He took a direct hit and screamed. No single word could succinctly describe how horrendously hot it was. Yu imagined Hell was rather temperate by comparison.

Rudra sank into the fist of liquid rock, and the sensors indicated the inferno boiling the nano-armor had skyrocketed to 1,069 Celsius. But still the ADAMAS suit held strong, refusing to melt even as Yu endured the pain. He couldn’t do it forever, though.

“Come on, Mark III!”

Yu activated the body-wide jet stream thrusters, and the Frame shot skyward out of the lava, returning once again to the amber curtain in the clouds. He looked down on Wakayama Bay and the giant wading within it. Its face bubbled and ejected three more streams of lava.

“Enough of this!”

Yu accelerated—*fast*—but he wasn’t dodging this time. He plummeted straight towards the fast-approaching geysers, picking up velocity at a speed only made possible by the anti-gravity lifters. In seconds, he

shattered the sound barrier, then exploded past Mach 2, then Mach 3, 4, 5, and beyond. The jet streams hissed, and the air rolled with the deafening roar that trailed in the wake of a sonic boom.

He and the Mark III became the center of a supersonic shock wave. The black and gold armor collided with one of the lava geysers, scattering the stream of bubbling rock effortlessly. Yu didn't slow down.

"Holy Shroud! Gimme a hand!"

Tearing off a piece of the cloth around his neck, the Shroud changed to Excalibur Mode in Yu's hand as he plunged towards the lava giant. And then, the human, sword-wielding shock wave pierced the colossus. Yu turned back around and impaled it again, and again, and again, blasting away the Anomaly's liquidy and fleshless form at random, perforating the monster.

"Where is it?! Something's holding this thing together, but I can't catch it! It keeps moving!"

Rudra's autonomous awareness had produced several windows in Yu's visor, including aerial shots from numerous angles. In the one depicting its back, there was a blue indicator labeled in English as "Mystical Core," accompanied by an annotation explaining that destroying this would break the spell. But by the time Yu circled around to the giant's back, the core had already moved to its waist. He darted down there, and then it shot to its flank, then to its right shoulder. The Holy Saber was useless without a target to plant its edge in.

"You fight as churlishly as your name, warrior!"

"That voice," Yu murmured. "You're the archmage! Scullchance!"

His sonic rush attack was losing steam. He exited the creature and hovered in the sky above, glancing around warily. There was no sign of the mage, but her sinister chuckle echoed across the amber aurora-tinted firmament.

"I went to great pains to provide you with a suitable welcome. Do not insult me by thinking you can fell my pawn so easily!"

"What, you're just going to let your minions do the fighting for you?!" Yu shot back fearlessly. "Face me yourself! Let's pick up where we left off!" He spoke boldly, with a booming voice. Devicer Three would not be afraid.

"You truly are a fool if you think me, Keeper of the Pride, base enough to stoop to such tedium! In all that I do, it is for the thrill that I act. For the exhilaration of battle. The exaltation of conquest. *That* is why I fight!"

"Those are some sick hobbies you've got there," Yu spat.

If this were a soccer match, no doubt he would be the playmaker, or what Italian players called "fantasistas." The person everyone counted on to handle the ball like magic and make fantasy into reality on the pitch. As one of the most well-known fantasistas famously said, "I'll kick that ball like a rainbow after the rain."

But this wasn't just a game. And the rain was a war for life on Earth as they knew it.

“I need to somehow get us on the same level as last time,” Yu muttered. “Mark III—Rudra, I need you to prepare the Doomsday Book.”

More and more, Yu found himself drawn to the Mark III’s true name over the impersonal serial number. He and the Asura Frame were melding, and they’d never been closer than in that moment. As Yu came to understand Rudra, Rudra came to accept Yu.

Still, though, the Doomsday Book was a trump card. It needed time to initialize, and the lava giant was recovering. Slowly, the numerous holes in its liquefied body were already starting to close up.

The geyser attacks commenced once more, and Yu resumed his acrobatic evasive maneuvers all over again.

“*Three, I think we can help!*” Aliya suddenly transmitted.

“Aliya and Natsuki discovered something incredible!” Ein exclaimed. “You’ll stand alone no more, Yu!”

“Six!”

Natsuki swung the Mark VI Asura Frame with audacious confidence, and as long as she held it in her hands, the anti-gravity lifters allowed her to fly freely through the air. Although, to be honest, weightlessness didn’t actually lend itself to martial arts very well.

She dove onto the back of a dragon as it darted by the tower and plunged the guandao into its neck. The defenseless reptile’s cervical spine snapped like a twig. With Natsuki still clinging to its back, the dragon plummeted to the earth, landing with a great boom. The girl nimbly leaped off at the last second, completely unfazed.

The wheel at Vritra’s ferrule sang, “Gate! Gate! Paragate! Gate! Gate! Paragate! Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha! Gate! Gate! Paragate!”

The whirring of the Prayer Wheel had been replaced by an ethereal hymn. A chorus comprised of both men and women. A yellow cloth was tied to where the blade and shaft joined, fluttering like a long, narrow flag, and very much resembling the scarf adorned by Devicer Three. It had manifested from a surge of nanofactors that spilled from the weapon moments after her transmission with Ein ended.

“The Holy Shroud—Her Majesty the elf’s stamp of approval,” she murmured. “Just like Yu’s. It’s like we’re a team!”

Eight white dragons had attacked in total. Natsuki had knocked that number down to two, both of which were on their last ropes against the fighter jet and arm droids. She sighed and brushed the dust off herself, glancing back at her most recent kill before reeling back and hurling the Mark VI into the air like a javelin. It tore through the sky, through the rampaging air elementals and the swirling gusts.

“Don’t let that Shroud slack off just ’cause he’s new!” she shouted after her partner.

It was the same technique Yu had used about one month ago. The Mark VI soared over the settlement, around its entire twenty-five kilometer

radius, dispersing and scattering clouds of golden powder—flecks of the Holy Shroud itself. Just as it was potent against the undead, so too was it the scourge of the incorporeal. Like elementals.

Purified by the sacred dust, the winds around Nayuta at last began to settle. Natsuki snatched the Green Dragon's shaft out of the air as it returned. And it still seemed ready for more.

"All right, Vritra, show me what droids you've got!" Natsuki gripped the Green Dragon with both hands and pointed it skyward. Adaptive nanofactors streamed out of the edged Asura Frame's shaft, its Prayer Wheel, and even its blade.

The droids it constructed were massive. Twice the size of the dragons it had just slayed. And they took the shape of pale white, translucent icicles—MUV Snow Crystals. Nine were suspended in midair.

"Now go!" Natsuki commanded. "Yu could use the help!"

The lava giant was still visible, and the newly created droids set out towards the flowing mass at once.

The humanoid torrent of lava punched, slapped, and lurched at the pest buzzing around its gelatinous form. "This isn't good," the pest groaned between near misses. "The Doomsday Book is taking so much energy I'm starting to lag behind!"

The wheel at Yu Ichinose's waist spun furiously, all of its output being drained not by his aerial maneuvers, but by the winds. Even without the air elementals, they were picking up and approaching gale force. But speed came at the cost of the Rudra's mobility.

If he got knocked out of the sky now, then all that time he was buying for the Book would come to nothing.

"Take heart, Yu! Aid has arrived with fire's bane!"

"Ein!" Yu cried. "Wait, are those *droids*?"

Suddenly, a deployment of floating icicles appeared on the battlefield. Nine MUV Snow Crystals, Vritra's all-purpose combat auxiliary droids. But rather than the nature of his reinforcements, Yu was more surprised by the misshapen bullets they fired, and the fact that they were doing visible damage to the lava giant.

The monster turned its attention from Yu and swung at the Snow Crystals with all its weight. All it managed, however, was to make itself an easier target. Yu listened to the hissing of steam as the crystals pelted the molten beast, bullets melting upon contact.

"And they have...water cannons?!"

"Close! They're liquid helium bullets," Aliya corrected.

"Like dry ice, but on steroids!" Ijuin added.

Even as they spoke, the nine mechanical icicles pounded the lava giant, giving Yu the time he needed to finally pull the ace out from his sleeve.

[System Now Booting Doomsday Book "VIDYA-MANTRA RUDRA2"]

Upon seeing the English text scroll across his screen, Yu shouted, “Ein! Doomsday Book chapter two is ready!”

“Uploading the Gospel Code now,” she replied. “The beast of the wind is yours to command!”

Following her transmission, Ein’s voice echoed in Yu’s head as clear as day.

—The sinners of the trailokya know not their sin.

—Such as the fools of the four wombs know not their folly.

—In darkness we are born, to darkness we return, and to darkness we are born anew.

The windbeast appeared before Yu, its wispy being as ghostly as a collection of white smoke, its stature that of a panther. The mightiest of His Majesty of the Storm’s knights.

“In the name of your king, Rudra, I command you!” Yu roared. “Let your tempest rage!”

Doomsday Book chapter two—the verse of Tempest Judgment. The windbeast became a great whirling waterspout that would rend all from the ocean below that dared stand in its path and cast their remains spiraling up into the sky. All that stood in the barren waters of Wakayama Bay this day, however, its passing ships gone with the Evacuation, was an otherworldly castle sitting upon a lotus pedestal like a mirage in the desert, and the vexing lava giant. Neither were spared the godly might of the windbeast.

But the portal-keep was protected by its archmage. Just like before, barrier magic was put in place, and countless runic circles manifested all around the mythical palace. Buffeted by the violent and raging winds, its walls creaked and were nearly torn off, but the SS-class defense spell held fast.

The lava giant, however, was at the mercy of the ripping flurry, and pieces of its body were plucked off, sent corkscrewing into oblivion. As the crimson colossus was torn to shreds, little would soon remain to maintain the Anomaly’s bodily structure.

Yu did not bask in his small victory. In the blink of an eye, he exploded past Mach 4 and 5, all the way to 6, and became a supersonic, armored dart headed straight for the portal-keep. A surveillance droid told him his target —the mage and her lion—stood on a balcony of the tallest tower. He cleaved through her palace’s defenses with a single swing of the Holy Saber.

Yu collided with the archmage.

“Vajra One!” she growled. “You’ve some nerve to appear before the Lioness without an invitation!”

“Ask me if I care!”

He had struck Scullchance with immense force, but a barrier of some kind kept the lion-mounted girl untouched. Still, Yu didn’t let up, and he

pushed the both of them off of the tower and out of the protection of her castle.

Now it was just the two of them and the impossibly amber aurora overhead.

3

Yu set the field to match his first encounter with the archmage. He endured spell after spell—Perish, Incinerate, Suicide Curse, Mind Blast—as the anti-magic shell nullified each one while he waited for the perfect moment.

“Rot! Burn! Hear, for your demise approaches! Oh, dulcet are the tones of pain and suffering!”

The fight had taken them all the way to the ruins of Osaka Bay. Skyscraping buildings along the sunken streets of the once-thriving metropolis jutted from the water, and the roof of one such obelisk was the current setting for the battle between Devicer Three and Scullchance of the Pride.

Her lower half fused with the lion, Scullchance thrashed a battle-axe while Yu deflected the brutal edge of the blade with the MUV Crow Gauntlet affixed to his right arm. The half-lion maiden’s blows were vicious and precise, and although Yu fought stubbornly with the clawed gauntlet, it was nearly impossible for him to get a strike in. The constant stream of A-class spells only made it that much more difficult.

“Fly, crimson arrows! Halt, thy sands of time! Crumble beneath my might!”

“Hang in there, Rudra!” Yu groaned. “Your anti-magic shell’s all I’ve got!”

Flames doused the Mark III, followed by a surge of numbness, then a powerful shock wave. And while Rudra quelled each curse as best it could, the Chosen’s mystic arts were not trifling things. Yu felt everything before the spells could be silenced—the searing heat, the fluttering of his heart as it nearly stopped beating, and the impact that felt like a truck had plowed straight into him.

The plus side, though, was that he had the enemy’s full attention.

“*We’re all set!*” Natsuki said.

“Then let’s do it!” Yu replied.

“On it! Let’s see, so I just read this passphrase here... By order of the gods, I command thee!”

Noticing their secret conversation, Scullchance scowled. “You and your primitive ape people are scheming something, aren’t you?!”

“Pretty clever for a bunch of monkeys, huh?” Yu taunted.

Before she could respond, the 256-meter-tall roof exploded into a cloud of debris, the blast extending down and annihilating five out of the fifty-six floors below. But it wasn’t like someone had planted explosives. The bomb had come from *the water*.

Of course, this was far from enough to end their battle.

Following on Yu's heels, Scullchance kicked off the collapsing building and pounced through the air with her feline legs as if it were something *all* lions could do. She looked down at the remains of old, downtown Osaka beneath the waves.

"A drake? An orochi?" she blustered. "Have you primitives gotten your filthy hands on a water naga?!"

Yu faced her in midair. "Not exactly, but I'll give you partial credit."

A second burst came from the ocean, and then a third. The rectangular objects that hurtled towards Scullchance were between twenty and forty meters long, and they were familiar. Because they used to crisscross across all of urban Japan—they were train cars. Specifically, they had come from the JR Yumesaki Line, one of the many well-traveled railways of Osaka that had once run every single day.

Nanofactors from Natsuki's Mark VI had turned the coaches into improvised missiles, packing them with MUV Peek-A-Boo Bombers that could attach themselves to anything, even at microscopic size, and detonate at the Devicer's command. It wasn't just one or two, though. No, a veritable rail yard emerged from the bay. An artillery barrage of *fifty or sixty* train-bombs bombarded the airborne archmage.

Scullchance snarled and began to incant a spell. "Mercy, oh Great One!"

The sadistic Lioness was at last forced to defend herself. A protective light shimmered around her as she leaped out of the way of the oncoming battery, the light shielding her from the flames and explosions of any near misses. It was like a high-budget circus performance.

But what one might forget amidst the chaos was that passenger cars normally held *passengers*.

Dripping wet with seawater and flying straight for Scullchance, Devicer Six emerged from one of the cars. Her high-pitched yet fierce battle cry ripped through the air together with Vritra as Natsuki brought the guandao's blade through Scullchance's axe-wielding arm, severing it at the elbow.

"You…" the mage growled low. "What have you done to my arm?!"

"Now, Three!" Natsuki shouted.

"Let's go!" Yu cried.

He accelerated into a sonic stream once more and threw himself against the force field guarding the half-lion mage, bearing down with the Asura's might and the talons of the Crow Gauntlet on his right arm.

"You fight," Scullchance bellowed, "as gracelessly as your name! Vajra One!"

"Sorry, but heroes don't play by your rules anymore," Yu shot back. "No one person can stand alone. These days, we fight together." The age of the fantasista, of the Maradona and the Zico, was over. Yu stared the girl down, and from one hero to another, as both a tactician of modern soccer and resident of Earth, he spoke. "The key to victory is cracking your opponent's

strategy, regrouping with your teammates, then crushing it with a better one. And that's exactly what we did. That's how we *won*."

Scullchance unleashed all her magic and all her might to stand firm against Yu's supersonic charge. Met pound for pound in raw strength, Yu activated the electromagnetic heat radiator in the Crow Gauntlet's palm as it bore into her barrier. He poured into it every spark of energy that the Prayer Wheel could churn out, and with the combined fury of both the scientific and the arcane, the scorching waves penetrated the enemy's magical shield.

"You sully my honor!" Scullchance howled. "Curse you! Curse you, Warrior of Earth!"

Even at the very end, as the beautiful lion girl scattered into dust beneath alien skies, incinerated by the Asura's right hand, still did she refuse to utter the name—Devicer Three.

Epilogue

1

Two weeks after the battle between Nayuta and the portal-keep...

“Ein!”

“I can always count on you, Yu!”

Yu, dressed in his kit, displayed a brilliant through pass to the Replicant girl. She was garbed in the same outfit and had skillfully slipped past the defense with a beautiful off-the-ball maneuver. Catching up with the ball in front of the opponents’ goal, she delivered a textbook-perfect kick without even trapping it first and sent it straight out of the goalie’s grasp. It was her second goal of the match.

Her teammates ran up to congratulate their new superstar, but Ein was already throwing her arms around Yu, nuzzling her cheek against his.

“P-Personal space, Ein!” he stammered.

“Do the athletes of this sport not all embrace one another when a point is scored? The others can wait! I wish to share this moment with you!”

“Soccer is a team sport! You can’t show favoritism on the field!”

“Well, I’m going to anyway!” Ein pouted. “I know you and Natsuki were doing something very similar behind my back.”

“Not this intimately!”

They owed this frivolous moment of peace to the efforts of everyone in the city who had been busy dealing with the aftermath of the battle. Only now had they found the time to resume their regular soccer matches as a bit of respite. Many talented players had scouted Yu for their teams, but ultimately he’d chosen a more casual one. One where he could play with his friends.

“Lady Ein’s known about soccer for barely a month,” Ijuin said from the sidelines. “How’s she pulling off plays like that already?”

Shiba stood nearby, holding a paper cup of watered-down shochu liquor and idling away his day off. “Her footwork could still use some practice,” he remarked. “But her game sense is impressive. And that sort of thing doesn’t come easy.”

“You’re the one who set Ichinose up with his team, yeah? You like soccer?”

“I watched it quite a bit. A lot of J1. Occasionally foreign leagues,” Shiba replied, smiling mildly as the game resumed. “Your friend’s an observant guy, you know? Solid judgment and a quick thinker too. It’s funny seeing him play soccer like he uses the Mark III.”

“I wish Her Highness would hurry and grow tired of this particular fancy,” a less enthusiastic spectator grumbled.

“Or else she’ll be dragging you outside every week, I bet,” Aliya said teasingly. “Just like today.”

Nadal grunted and quickly changed the subject. “Anyway, about the Mark VI Frame,” he muttered. “I believe we owe its awakening to *you*, Aliya.”

“Y-You think so too?” she murmured.

“We’ll need more data to know for certain. But it is safe to say that your nano-abilities may be coming into a new kind of power. We’ll have to investigate the Mark III’s awakening next.” The speaker stroked his chin. “My sources tell me you conducted tests by inducing a sort of artificial awakening via the previous Devicer’s ashes. But given the circumstances surrounding the Mark VI, you appear to be the common denominator.”

“Me?”

He nodded. “If you possess the power to bring life back to dormant Asura Frames, then perhaps there is still hope for...” Nadal’s words trailed off into his mind.

Aliya shrugged, more than aware that once he was gone, there was no bringing him back.

“Long story short, I’m pretty sure that means you saved the day,” Natsuki chimed in next to her. She wore her peony furisode like always, but her trademark katana was nowhere to be seen. That was because she didn’t need it anymore; her new partner was at her beck and call. She grinned lazily at the ongoing match. “A lot of people lost their lives, but even more are still here thanks to you.”

“Oh!” Aliya exclaimed. “Ein scored again.”

With her third goal, the game was set. It had been an impressively flashy volley, and now she was forcing Yu into yet another round of nonconsensual skinship. Once she had hugged him to a satisfactory degree, she went around high-fiving the other teammates.

And then she came to the last of them.

“You play well,” she complimented him. “Guard steadfast!”

“Right...” he replied.

“Show me your palm. We must share the moment!”

The young goalkeeper hesitated for a while, before softening his expression and surrendering. The two high-fived. The former captain had yet to give up a single point to an enemy team. Sakuma had indeed played well.

Natsuki nodded as she watched. “Heard the coup got brushed under the rug, and now he’s an executive for the militia.”

“My uncle and a few other people probably have some concerns about that,” Aliya said, glancing at Nadal. He was still off in his own world. “But at the end of the day, he’ll probably say we’re ‘simply too short-staffed to afford turning competent workers away!’”

Natsuki laughed. “So decrees the great Devicer Three, after all.”

“They’re still everyone’s hero, even though the military has no idea who they are anymore. Apparently that captain let Yu join the team with Ein without much of a fuss.”

The team that the two of them had joined consisted primarily of people within the Defense Force. Shiba was apparently acquainted with them from his Ground Defense days, which was how he had managed to set them up.

“People change when they’ve got a weapon in their hands, especially in chaotic times like these,” Natsuki murmured resolutely. “I’m glad no one here did.”

“Where’s this coming from?” Aliya asked.

“I’ve seen it happen a lot. People take up guns and swords ’cause they’re scared of the Anomalies, but eventually everyone tends to find an excuse to start pointing them at each other. It’s easy to make people listen through the barrel of a rifle.” She took a breath. “I’m tellin’ you. Three whole seasons. So much drama.”

“Oh… Yeah.”

“They weren’t kidding when they said you never know what you have ’til you lose it,” Natsuki said. “There was a reason we had the protectors, the peacekeepers, the criminals, the lawmakers—all these different people in specific roles. When everyone’s got a weapon, and everyone’s trying to enforce their own authority, well, that’s when you get crap like people at the end of the century trying to be supreme rulers, if you know what I mean.” She laughed again, her tone still serious. “But Yu… He’s got the strongest weapon of all, and he’s still Yu. I feel like sticking with him’s the right thing to do.”

She spoke that last part not as Natsuki Hatano, but as Devicer Six.

The boy in question was in the middle of a pass, running down the opposing team’s defense. In that moment, he appeared as nothing more than a middle schooler playing soccer. The truth, though, was that he was the black and gold warrior.

He was the one.

“Come to think of it,” Aliya muttered, “I wonder where the other Devicers are?”

2

Quldald of the Whirlwind, having ceded Nayuta to his comrade, brought his keep upon eastern Shikoku. Looming above the ocean, a mirage in the sky, his citadel of cyclones overlooked a city called Tokushima by the locals, the capital of a prefecture by the same name. The archmage gazed out, scanning the enemy territory, when he noticed something.

“Ah, is that a stronghold I spy?”

The Defense Force’s Camp Tokushima was located just by the coast, though the long campaign had left the bastion a far cry from Quldald’s own. Still, it was clear at a glance that the base was still occupied.

Thus, Quldald decided to indulge in his whimsy.

With a detachment of just a few of his Anomalies, the archmage took to the field personally. His heart was simply aflutter with thoughts of the black and gold warrior. For it was he who was indeed more fit to do battle with

the great hero. Scullchance was no more, and it would soon be time for a vengeful reunion. This little distraction was but an appetizer for the main course to come.

“How disappointing,” he sighed. “It seems I chose my opponents prematurely. Perhaps they needed some time yet to mature.”

Camp Tokushima was already in flames. It was a sea of fire as far as the eye could see. Quldald found himself less than satisfied but told himself not to blame the locals for his inability to stay his hand.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a flash of white streaking its way towards him from the northeast. Almost like a shooting star.

“Oh?”

When the shining entity stopped before him, the light faded to reveal a noticeably short and young boy. He was smaller in stature than even the black and gold warrior, and his hair was pure white. He wore typical garb, customary for the locals—a long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans. The cloth he’d cloaked over himself was worn and tattered. His eyes were sunken, dead.

But all of this was secondary to what drew Quldald’s eyes first—a red scarf around the boy’s neck.

“Hello, Earth boy,” he greeted. “Tell me, why do you wield the Shroud?”

“Why the hell do you think?” the boy snapped. “I’m Devicer Seven. That’s why.”

“Well now! And what brings you before me?”

“Same reason it always is.” He stared deep. “To kill you, archmage.”

The features in his complexion appeared more defined than those of many of the Japanese Quldald had come across. And yet he spoke the local tongue fluently. What was more, the boy could seemingly fly through the air, and his eyes—they carried a darkness too deep for a boy as young as the soprano tenor of his voice betrayed.

The Chosen Dharva rejoiced. Another chance meeting for another chance experience. Simply splendid.

EXPLICATIONS

| STANDARD DROIDS VS THE PANDEMONIUM SERIES |

Natsuki: It’s pretty nice having so many droids around Nayuta.

Yu: They seem a little different from the Asura Frame’s, though.

Ein: I should hope so. The Asura’s Pandemonium swarm may be of similar construction, but they are one with the mad god itself.

Aliya: When they’re hosted by the Asura Frame, they receive power and energy from it directly, so they really are sort of like miniature projections of it. We’re not talking just hyper-advanced drone technology—this is sci-fi territory.

Ijuin: I don’t know any UAV that could fly like a plane with an actual pilot, after all.

Aliya: Actually, at least in terms of close combat, manned craft tend to be at a disadvantage against the speed and instincts of beast-type Anomalies.

| WILD GAME |

Ijuin: Remember those pheasants? Honestly, if you hadn’t told me what it was, I woulda assumed chicken.

Yu: They are sorta like free-range poultry, and they’re not very gamy.

Ijuin: Deer’s good too, but still kinda lacking, y’know?

Yu: I like the simple taste of red meat. Especially when it’s nice and lean.

Ijuin: You fool! You fatless fool! I’m dyin’ for some pork or beef! The good stuff! I want it to DRIP with fat!

Natsuki: Ha! Good luck finding either of those in the wild in Japan!

Aliya: We could find boar at Awaji Island or back on the mainland. And it’s possible some farm pigs might have escaped and gone feral.

Yu: There’s definitely a market for whoever wants to go fetch some and start up a ranch again.

Ein: I hear sheep are more suited to domestication. They’re docile, have many children, and most of all, they’re delicious.

Ijuin: You don’t find too much of that kinda meat in Japan. But man, mutton curry and lamb chops sound sooo good!

Natsuki: So everyone in the city gets a weapon, but what’s with all the Russian guns?

Ijuin: They’re more user-friendly than Japanese makes, and easier to build. Countries all around the world copy their models. Anyone with the right tools could make ’em. As long as you’re not too worried about quality, that is.

Aliya: Nayuta’s primary concern is with Asura Frame development, not conventional weaponry. So as far as firearms are concerned, they prioritized mass-producibility and efficiency.

Yu: Ironically, that’s exactly why we came here, huh?

Ein: I hear that the war on Russia’s Eastern Front has sent no small amount of their people and resources to the settlement, seeking refuge.

Afterword

Long time no read, everyone. We really did it. Two books published in two months! …Maybe. As of this writing, I have no idea. Let's just assume everything works out for the sake of my sanity. To all of you devoted readers who wasted no time in buying the first volume, I'm glad we get to meet again so soon.

On a related note, I've been an author for a good ten years now, and not once have I experienced a publishing schedule this tight before. My deepest thanks to our illustrator, Shirabii, for pulling through. You did the impossible.

Anyway, so I think it goes without saying that *Fantasy Inbound* draws a lot of inspiration from American comics, tokusatsu, manga, and pretty much any work centered around superheroes.

To be a hero is to be someone "great," so to speak. Someone brave. And this idea extends to the masked (or "kamen") superheroes that we're all probably familiar with nowadays. The recent sensation that is *The Avengers* speaks to how far this concept has come, going beyond national and cultural borders, as well as even age and the most niche of cult followings.

When it comes to really *defining* a hero and exploring what it means to be one, American comics take it to the next level. Part of this is because some of these stories can go on for far longer than the average Japanese manga, many featuring the same protagonist for well over a quarter of a century. Characters like Batman and Superman have been starring in their comics for over eighty years, gone through reboot after reboot, and they're still going strong. The *Iron Man* comics started all the way back during the Vietnam War.

As the authors and illustrators portray these characters over decades and decades of history, it only stands to reason that their minds are prodded and explored in different ways. And I think one of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's poster children is a good example of this—Captain America.

Captain America, otherwise known by his real name as Steve Rogers, was a supersoldier created to both fight in the war against Nazi Germany and stand as an American symbol for justice. His comic first ran during World War II.

But eventually, both in the story and reality, the war ended, and then came the dawn of the Cold War and the Vietnam War. And all of a sudden, the country he was meant to be the hero of was not so infallibly trustworthy. American justice was not so absolute anymore. So around the sixties, he became less of a symbol for his nation or military, and more of a metaphor for the American spirit—freedom of expression, individuality, and pride. Those became the ideals that he fought and risked his life for.

When I say the “American spirit,” though, I don’t mean that these values are intrinsically or solely American. The hero Captain “America” became more than that, and now he’s a force for good regardless of nationality, race, or culture.

Personally, I’m a huge fan of his movie trilogy, and I think they encapsulate this growth of his character very well.

(By the way, the subtitle for volume one of this series was absolutely an homage to Captain America. Google “Project Rebirth” or “Operation Rebirth” if you’re interested.)

Our protagonist, Yu, is faced with many of the same moral dilemmas as Steve Rogers, particularly in regards to the question of what makes a hero. He may have found his answer for now, but who knows what encounters will challenge his beliefs in the future? Heroes, after all, are always the ones forced to make the hardest choices.

We may also see how other Devicers have tackled this debate for themselves. Maybe even in the next volume. Stay tuned, because the battle for Earth is about to reach a new level of scope.

Until we meet again in volume three.

Fantasy Inbound

02

The King's Return

JOE TAKEDUKI

《ILLUST.》 SHIRABII

02 CONTENTS VOLUME TWO

Chapter 1: Prisoners of Castle Whirlwind

Chapter 2: A City on the Sea

Chapter 3: A New Life

Chapter 4: The King's Return

Chapter 5: Across Sky and Ocean

Epilogue

ura-Type Exo-Frame MarkIII

All PRAJNA Running System
Now Booting,

Spellbook
"PRAJNA HEART SUTRA"

Gate Gate Paragate
Parasamgate
Bodhi Svaha

Mantra Server Startup Complete.

Translator Notes

So we meet again. You just couldn't get enough reverse-isekai tokusatsu. Or maybe it was my eloquent voice, here in these note sections, that lured you back once more. Regardless, dear reader, you're here now, and that means it's time for...

Culture lessons! With me, Matt, the translator! Please, hold your applause.

Okay, I'm done amusing myself. In volume one, we talked generally about the most fundamental concepts of Hindu mythology and Buddhist thought that underlies much of the isekai aesthetic of *Fantasy Inbound*. I picked those subjects specifically—Rudra, samsara, karma, sunyata, asuras, et cetera—in an effort to create a decent-enough foundation that I hope educated the uninitiated on at least the bare minimum of the cultures this series pulls from.

I'd like to build on that in this entry and discuss some of the less...nebulous ideas. Of course, if you're coming into this having not read my *first* bout of surface-level rambling, I'd obviously encourage you to grab the premium edition of volume one off of J-Novel Club's website and check it out because I'm a narcissist. But if you're just in this out of a mild curiosity, don't worry. This isn't a *Kingdom Hearts* spin-off game, and my oh-so-enlightening explanations from the last volume shouldn't be necessary to understand anything here. I'll also do my best to sprinkle in information where it's relevant to avoid confusion.

As always, I want to preface this section by stating that I am a foreigner touching on cultures that are distant to me and my everyday life. Much of what I'm going to talk about is as new to me as it might be to you. We're all learners here, so my only goal is to highlight said cultures and to offer a little bit of context in relation to *Fantasy Inbound*'s plot as a whole.

With that out of the way, let's begin with...

The Holy Shroud

Coming right off the coattails of me prefacing a discussion about South and East Asian cultures, we have *Fantasy Inbound*'s most prominent allusion to *western* culture. I know, I'm too good at this.

The Holy Shroud refers to the Shroud of Turin, said to be the cloth used as Jesus Christ's burial shroud after his crucifixion. Legend has it one can see his face imprinted into the fabric. There's not too much for me to touch on in this regard (and obviously Excalibur Mode is a direct reference to the Arthurian legend), but what *is* interesting is another name it goes by: the sacred sarira. So we're going to talk about that instead.

Truth be told, this is a little complicated on the Japanese side of things. The kanji for the Holy Shroud is □□□ (read as *sei-gai-fu*). The components break down to □, the kanji for "holy," □, the kanji for "corpse," and □, the

kanji for “cloth.” Put together, it makes sense, right? Holy corpse cloth. A holy burial shroud. The Holy Shroud. The complicated part is the Japanese term for its other title—□□□□□□□□ (read as *shariira no seigai*). If you consider how the kanji that get shared between the two are the ones for “holy” and “corpse,” it would almost seem like the Shroud’s defining characteristic comes not from it being a cloth, but from death.

□□ is not *actually* a real word in Japanese, but that never stopped anyone before. So we have to look at the other part of the term to really understand it—the sarira part.

A sarira is just a Buddhist artifact, really. Mostly beads or pearls or things like that, but not exclusively. Supposedly, they’re often discovered in the cremated remains of Buddhist monks, and they’re revered as spiritual relics, said to essentially embody the essence and teachings of the people they came from. Another interesting point is that the Japanese word for cremated remains (□□—*shari*), particularly in a Buddhist sense, actually originates from this word.

Whatever we can gather from this is largely subjective, as currently we have little in-universe knowledge as to what exactly the Holy Shroud is, but its connections with death are certainly interesting.

Yaksha/Yakshini and Gandharva

Jumping topics a bit, if these words look familiar, that’s because they probably should. In *Fantasy Inbound*, the elves refer to themselves as the “Yakshia.” And they refer to the mages as the “Dharva.” Huh. Must be a coincidence. Anyway, moving on to the next topic…

What? You want me to do my job and actually provide information? Oh, fine, if you insist.

Ahem. Anyway. It’s pretty clear that the word “Yakshia” is derived from “yaksha” and “yakshini.” Both of these Sanskrit words refer to the same thing, the former being the male variant and the latter being female. The yaksha (as I’ll call them for the sake of convenience) are nature spirits in Indian mythology. Generally, they’re pretty chill beings, but they can sometimes be a bit rambunctious depending on your source, as tends to be the case for all brands of spirits. They’re considered minor deities, and they encompass a wide range of beings.

On the other side of the spectrum, the mortal enemies of the Yakshia are the Dharva. In the context of this series, the Dharva are a chosen people whose sole purpose seems to be conquering Earth. Their namesake, the gandharva, actually share some of these characteristics.

The gandharva are a class of beings who are closely related to the yaksha, but are primarily considered entertainers. Singers and dancers. People with a flare for the dramatic, let’s say. Notably, in Buddhism they’re considered kind of a nuisance, and in early Vedic texts, they would travel between the divine world and the human world as messengers. In some

cases, they're even part animal, much like our lovely friend Scullchance was.

As tends to be the case with broad classifications of deities, there are many depictions and descriptions of both the yaksha and the gandharva, which makes them a little difficult to summarize here. So I won't attempt to. But what I will say is that these guys gave me a bit of trouble early in the translation process. Their original names in my notes were "Yaxia" and "Dalva" respectively (given katakana's tendency to not be very good at distinguishing between letters in the English alphabet), and it wasn't until I ran into the yaksha in my research later on that I considered that the archmages were *probably* related to something in a similar way.

Honestly, to this day, I still have no idea how I made it halfway into volume one without making this connection, and I note it here as a reminder that we all forget that we have a brain sometimes.

Kumbhanda

Let's talk some monsters now. Counting the naga from last time, the second term worth bringing up actually comes from the end of the first volume, when Ein refers to the kraken monster as a "kumbhanda." Now, for people who have played the *Persona* or *Shin Megami Tensei* series of video games, that probably sounds weird, because kumbhandas don't really look like krakens. What they *do* look like is a lot more fun, so allow me to elucidate.

In Buddhist mythology, kumbhandas are dwarvish spirits, and their name can mean "gourd" or "pot-egg." The hilarious part, though, is that "egg" was a euphemism for "testicle" in its source language, so these guys are sometimes depicted as having, well, let's just say rather *large* family jewels.

The part about them related to the kraken enemy (at least in the context of this series) comes from none other than the data entry of previously-mentioned video game series *Shin Megami Tensei*, which states that they suck the life and vitality out of people. That's right—my first time citing a source, and it's from a video game.

If I must get academic, though, these monsters are a pretty good example of how difficult it can be to really pinpoint mythology when it's being colored by different generations and cultures. Most of what you'll find if you google "kumbhanda" will likely be from video games, and none of them are really, uh, *packing* what linguistics tell us they were (though maybe that's less a factor of cultural drift and more a factor of rating systems).

This brings to mind how Japanese kobolds and ogres are often depicted as dogs and pigs respectively due in part to the different ways *Dungeons & Dragons* and other western fantasy tropes spread overseas. I'm not actually going anywhere with that, but it's an interesting tangent that I was looking

for an excuse to throw in.

Kinnara

So another monster that we see near the end of volume one are sirens, or what Ein calls “kinnara.” We’ve got another case of a lack of family resemblance here, but those are always the more interesting ones, right?

In Buddhism and Hinduism, the kinnara (or kinnaris for the female variety, which I absolutely should have used in volume one, thank you for noticing) are celestial musicians, sort of like the gandharva. But that’s where the cultural similarities between Param and the real world stop. Real kinnara are actually part bird or horse, not fish, and they’re far more liked than sirens. They’re symbols of love, exceedingly harmless, and even benevolent, it seems.

Sirens, as I’m sure most of the western world knows, are decidedly *not* well-liked. Well, I’m lying, because *sometimes* they are, but most depictions have them luring sailors to horrible deaths with their songs. What we can gather from this is that however close Param’s language seems to be derived from Sanskrit, the culture is evidently not one-to-one.

Prajna and Prana

Before we get to the last topic, I ought to clarify something before I inevitably see some smarty pants try to call this a typo—these are totally different things.

Prajna (silent j) is a Buddhist term meaning “wisdom.” You might see it translated as “Perfect Wisdom” sometimes, but we’re not talking “don’t lick cold surfaces” wisdom. This is “understand the nature of the universe” wisdom (bonus points if you can guess what that is. We’ve talked about it before). When Ein speaks of prajna, she often refers to nanomachines in the same breadth.

Prana, on the other hand, is “life force.” You might see it used as a common buzzword for yoga or, you know, normal stuff like rejecting the notion that bodies need food to live so you subsist entirely off of “pranic energy.” That sort of thing. Note: “pranic” is a fake adjective that was created for the specific purpose of being a buzzword, so if you ever see me use it, you have permission to call me out.

Ahem. In *Fantasy Inbound*, prana is essentially magic. It functions in much the same way, and it can also be used as a unit of measurement. In the real world, prana permeates all the elements, and we can see that in the story as well. Portal-keeps need a lot of magic to materialize, so much that when they vanish, the surrounding area consumes the energy of the dead, turning corpses to dust. We see that very phenomenon in volume one.

The Pandemonium Gospel Code

Okay. It’s that time again. The big one.

Like last time, our final topic is going to be one of the Gospel Codes, specifically the one used to summon the Pandemonium droids. We had a lot to cover for the first Gospel we did, when we talked about the prose Ein recites to access the Astral Library, and we have even more for this one. Because this, reader, is probably the passage I've spent the single longest amount of time and effort on out of all the light novel work I've done thus far. So we're gonna break it apart in chunks like last time, and I'll explain how I reached the translation decisions I did.

—Witness the truth. Envision vajra.

I'm going to do something crazy now and include the original Japanese source text, thus opening myself up to complete, unabashed criticism from strangers. But I'm going to do it anyway for the sake of conveying just how loaded it is. Don't worry, you don't need to know what it says. This is for purely comparative purposes. The first Japanese line reads: □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

Firstly, the translated line we're focusing on right now does not convey the entirety of the nuance of the Japanese text above. All of the Gospel Codes so far have only been two sentences long, but I made the decision early on to give myself three in English because of *this* specific passage. So "witness the truth. Envision vajra" is only covering a *part* of the first half of the Gospel in its entirety, but anyway, let's get into it.

The first word I had to dig into was □□ (read: *gachirin*). These kanji together simply refer to the full moon, but there's clearly more going on here. On its own, the beginning clause of the source text roughly translates as "by the full moon in thy heart." But we're not talking about a *literal* full moon. We're talking about the full moon in Buddhist terms as conveyed by Kukai himself, which symbolizes purity and enlightenment. To yearn for such an ideal within oneself is called □□□ (read: *gachirinkan*). So what this bit—□□□□□□□□□□□□—means when it says "by the full moon in thy heart" is to seek enlightenment, the true nature of all things within oneself. Or in the way I chose to render it, to "witness" it.

To further expand on this idea and why I ended up seemingly condensing it so heavily, I want to touch on what I mean when I call enlightenment "the true nature of all things." The main problem I faced was that I failed to really find any succinct way to include the imagery of the moon when English cultures are simply lacking in the Buddhist connotation department, even in a cryptic sense. I had to understand the *idea* behind it all to be able to convey it in English in a way that doesn't sound like a *Kingdom Hearts* villain rant.

In order to do that, I had to understand *gachirin* better, and my dictionary dives took me to yet another symbolic moon-related term: □□□□ (*shinyo no tsuki*). And what this essentially points to is the nature of the moon and how it relates to the nature of the world. The moon is permanent

in its impermanence—it rises and falls unfailingly, but its form forever changes. In other words, the moon represents enlightenment: tathata.

Tathata is connected to sunyata (emptiness), which I briefly touched on in my last write up, and it literally means “thusness.” It’s simply the way things are. And…that’s really it. It is to simply be—the truth of all things. Enlightenment is understanding that things just are, and that’s the beauty of it.

So, *all* of that combined lends to my reasoning for why I translated a clause loaded with symbolic and connotative meaning for the essence of the universe into three words: “Witness the truth” (I’m lying but we’ll get to that later. Hold your pitchforks). And that leads me into the second half of this line: “Envision vajra.”

The most important part of the Japanese line for us here is: □□□□□□□□□□

Our fake, rigid translation of this down to its components is “envision the shape of *kongou*.” And no, I’m not talking about the warship, in anime girl format or otherwise. *Kongou* is the reading for the kanji □□, and it means a few things, but the most important one to us is the Sanskrit word “vajra,” noting that it has connotations of being indestructible like the Buddhist truth.

As you can probably tell, this translated rather nicely, but what tripped me up on this part were the implications for the usage of the word *kongou* throughout the rest of the series. If you’ve read volume one, you might remember many uses of the word “vajra” in all sorts of contexts, implying that what Scullchance means when she calls Yu “Vajra One” isn’t to do with the actual ritualistic weapon called a vajra, but the Sanskrit *word* “vajra.” I struggled for some time on how I wanted to render this recurring theme, because English isn’t very kind to me in that “vajra” most often refers to the weapon, but ultimately I decided the symbolism I needed was there regardless.

What kind of symbolism? Well, in Sanskrit, vajra is a word that means “thunderbolt” or “diamond,” and if you Google it you’ll probably come across a strange, dagger-like instrument. In *Fantasy Inbound*, we’re more so talking about the meaning and what it represents, rather than the actual weapon itself.

In short, a vajra is a ritualistic item in Vedic religions, said to be the most powerful weapon in the universe. It’s sort of a small club, with big, round end and pointed tip, and it’s commonly associated with Indra, the king of the devas. Important to us, though, is that, like a thunderbolt, it symbolizes cleaving through ignorance, and like a diamond, it’s as invincible as the truth. In that sense, it also symbolizes sunyata—the innate emptiness in everything that implies infinite significance. A key component of enlightenment.

To put this into context with *Fantasy Inbound*, when Scullchance calls Yu “Vajra One,” she’s associating him with great, immutable power, and possessing it seems to be equated with having experienced or undergone

some great feat. In the Japanese text, she refers often to having opened a “door” of vajra of some kind. In my own translation, I chose to render this in a more metaphorical sense, often referring to vajra as “truth” (as previously stated it represents), and the act of opening said door being more akin to having witnessed it. I’m ranting now, but this ties in a little with the way I translated the poem that I’m supposed to be talking about.

Okay, one last interesting tidbit about vajras (the real-world weapon, not the concept) is that they’re often paired with a bell called a ghanta, which represents prajna—wisdom. And the two of them together symbolizes the dichotomy of male and female. It’s something interesting to know, given how our Vajra One is accompanied by a keeper “of the key of wisdom.”

—See, says the Enlightened One, true strength in tathata.

Over two full pages in my document editor later, let’s move on to the next line of the Gospel Code. Thankfully, we’ve covered most of the elements in this line already, so we can just break this apart and use our new knowledge to understand it. The second Japanese line reads: □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□……

We’re going to focus on the second half: □□□□□□□□□□. Two things might stick out at once if you’re good at memorizing kanji: namely that we have both *gachirin* and *kongou* here. In an untranslated sense, this is saying “to see the *kongou* within one’s *gachirin*.” Immediately, I hope this makes it a little clearer when I say that the way the word “vajra” is used is a little tricky and goes beyond simply referring to the ritual instrument.

Here, the Enlightened One (the □□, read *kakusha*), is telling someone to see vajra inside the full moon within oneself. As I described before, *gachirin* is deeply connected to the concept of *shinyo no tsuki*, which in itself is a metaphor for the idea of tathata. Similarly, vajra is an invincible, immutable strength that derives from truth, as Indra uses it to strike down the ignorant. Thus, we get “see true strength in tathata.”

My train of logic for this one was pretty simple, and I almost left it at that. But I asked you earlier to hold your pitchforks. Although we’ve covered, I think, the core of the meaning, it still feels a little…lacking. It’s not very colorful for something that’s supposed to sound mystical, and what about the whole moon imagery?

—Give form to invincible serenity, flawless as the full moon.

That takes me to the last line of this Gospel. The purpose of adding this third line was to sort of…pepper it. Would I put this translation in an encyclopedia of Buddhist quotes and sayings? Probably not. But to quote myself from last time: Fortunately, however, I’m not translating an academic, historical text. I’m translating an edgy light novel.

The goal here was to reintroduce the imagery of the moon while sprinkling in a little more of what vajra means beyond a cursory glance. Although the Japanese Gospel Codes are consistently two lines long, the

reason I expanded it to three in English is largely because of this one in particular. Whatever old, obscure mantra the original lines are from, there's a 99% chance it's not going to be in English, so rather than attempt to follow the reference by searching for translations that don't exist, I wanted to do it by capturing both the message and the *spirit*. Adding this extra line gives me a little more room to do just that.

Something interesting to note is that my original draft of this line was "give form to pristine *fury*," rather than "serenity." Pretty big jump, but I ultimately made the change after doing something crazy: asking for help.

Now is when I reveal the twist that over half of what I just talked about came about thanks to discussions with J-Novel Club's excellent managing translator, Kristi Fernandez. She helped me work through so many of my thoughts and ideas regarding the linguistics of the Holy Shroud, the real-world origin of the Yakshia and Chosen Dharva, and this *entire* Gospel Code. Our back-and-forth helped me refine this final line in particular.

My idea behind using "fury" was that the vajra seemed like a very violent device to me. It's easy to see it that way with all the thunderbolts and smiting, and the fact that this is a chant used to conjure an army of massacring robots. But anger is kind of contrary to the core message of the entire rest of the passage, isn't it? The center of Buddhist thought is serenity, having a clear mind. Fighting to protect what you love doesn't equate to blind rage, and in fact Yu's own character growth is all about finding inner peace. The fact that he is *not* at peace is what causes dissonance between him and the Mark III.

But I wouldn't have made that connection (or been confident in half of these translation decisions) if I hadn't had someone to talk it over with and point me in a different direction. Sort of like how Yu needed to have a few heart-to-hearts with his friends to truly find his answer.

So remember: It's always okay to ask for help. Even professionals do it. Wait, I count as a professional? Huh. You learn something new every day.

As always, thanks for reading!

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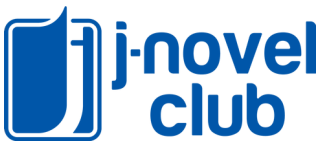

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Fantasy Inbound: Volume 2
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